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ARTES SCIENTIA VERITAS





A N  
E S S A Y  
ON THE APPLICATION  
O F  
N A T U R A L H I S T O R Y  
T O  
P O E T R Y.

BY J. <sup>John</sup> AIKIN.

CETERA, QUÆ VACUAS TENUISSENT CARMINE MENTES,  
OMNIA JAM VULGATA.

VIRGIL.

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MDCCLXXVII.



T O

THOMAS PENNANT, Esq.  
F. R. S.

O F

DOWNING, FLINTSHIRE.

S I R,

**I**NDEPENDENTLY of the desire I might have of publicly expressing my grateful sense of the friendship with which you honour me, justice would seem to require that a piece, the original idea of which was solely derived from an acquaintance with your works, and which to them is indebted for its most valuable materials, should be inscribed to you.

ITs



## iv DEDICATION.

ITS purpose is such as I flatter myself will obtain your approbation. It is to add incitements to the study of natural history, by placing in a stronger light than has yet been done, the advantages that may result from it to the most exalted and delightful of all arts, that of poetry. That this study is not only a source of agreeable and innocent amusement, but conduces to humanize and enlarge the mind, and in various ways to promote the happiness of mankind, has been sufficiently proved by the observations of many ingenious writers. But its application to the improvement of poetry, has not, I believe, been the subject of particular discussion.

Dr.  
Harding  
1-19-49  
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A292 20

## DEDICATION. v

cussion. By considering it in this view, I therefore thought that something new in its favour might be suggested; and if what I have done shall be the means of acquiring you a single fellow-labourer in your interesting researches into BRITISH ZOOLOGY, I shall not be dissatisfied with my success.

*I am,*

S I R,

*With the sincerest respect and esteem,*

*Your most obedient,*

*and obliged Servant,*

WARRINGTON,  
Feb. 2, 1777.

JOHN AIKIN.



A N  
E S S A Y  
ON THE APPLICATION OF  
NATURAL HISTORY  
TO  
P O E T R Y.

**N**O literary complaint is more frequent and general than that of the insipidity of Modern Poetry. While the votary of science is continually gratified with new objects opening to his view, the lover  
B of

## 2 POETICAL USE OF

of poetry is wearied and disgusted with a perpetual repetition of the same images, clad in almost the same language. This is usually attributed to a real deficiency of poetical genius in the present age; and such causes are assigned for it as would leave us little room to hope for any favourable change. But this solution, as it is invidious in its application, and discouraging in its effects, is surely also contradictory to that just relish for the beauties of poetry, that taste for sound and manly criticism, and that improvement in the other elegant arts, which must be allowed to characterise our own times. The state in which poetry has been transmitted to us will probably afford a truer, as well as a more favourable explanation of the fact.

## NATURAL HISTORY. 3

fact. It comes to us, worn down, enfeebled, and fettered.

THE *Epopœa*, circumscribed as it perhaps necessarily is within very narrow limits, scarcely offers to the most fertile invention a subject at the same time original and proper. Tragedy, exhausted by the infinite number of its productions, is nearly reduced to the same condition. The artificial construction of the Ode almost inevitably throws its composer into unmeaning imitation. Elegy, conversant with a confined, and almost uniform train of emotions, cannot but frequently become languid and feeble. Satire, indeed, is still sufficiently vigorous and prolific; but its offspring is little suited to please

#### 4 POETICAL USE OF

a mind sensible to the charms of genuine poetry. It would seem, then, that novelty was the present requisite, more, perhaps, than genius: it is therefore of importance to enquire what source is capable of affording it.

THAT novelty should have been the least sought for in that very walk which might be expected to yield it in the greatest abundance, will, doubtless, appear extraordinary. Yet, if it be admitted that the grand and beautiful objects which nature every where profusely throws around us, are the most obvious store of new materials to the poet, it must also be confessed that it is the store which of all others he has the most sparingly touched. An ingenious critic, Mr.

Warton,

## NATURAL HISTORY. 3

Warton, has remarked that " every painter of rural beauty since the time of Theocritus (except Thomson) has copied his images from him, without ever looking abroad into the face of nature themselves.\*" If this be not strictly just, it is at least certain that supineness and servile imitation have prevailed to a greater degree in the description of nature, than in any other part of poetry. The effect of this has been, that descriptive poetry has degenerated into a kind of phraseology, consisting of combinations of words which have been so long coupled together, that, like the hero and his epithet in Homer, they are become inseparable companions. It is amusing, under some of the most

\* Dedication of Warton and Pitt's Virgil.



## 6 POETICAL USE OF

common heads of description, in a poetical dictionary, to observe the wonderful sameness of thoughts and expressions in passages culled from a dozen different authors. An ordinary versifier seems no more able to conceive of the Morn without rosy fingers and dewy locks, or Spring without flowers and showers, loves and groves, than of any of the heathen deities without their usual attributes. Even in poets of a higher order, the hand of a copyist may be traced much oftener than the strokes of an observer. Has a picturesque circumstance been imagined by some one original genius? Every succeeding composer introduces it on a similar occasion. He, perhaps, improves, amplifies, and in some respect varies the idea ; and in  
so

## NATURAL HISTORY. 7

so doing may exhibit considerable taste and ingenuity; but still he contents himself with an inferior degree of merit, while the materials are all before him for attaining the highest; and fails of gratifying that natural thirst after *novelty* which may be supposed peculiarly to incite the reader of poetry.

THE following example of this propensity to imitation, taken from writers of distinguished character, will aptly illustrate what has been advanced.

SHAKESPEARE, in *Macbeth*, thus paints the approach of night.

---

to black Hecat's summons  
The shard-born beetle with his drowsy hums  
Hath rung night's yawning peal.

## 8 POETICAL USE OF

THE same circumstance is represented in these lines of Milton's *Lycidas*.

———— both together heard  
What time the gray-fly \* winds her sultry horn,  
Battening our flocks with the fresh dews of night.

GRAY's *Elegy in a country church-yard*  
next offers the beautiful line

Save where the beetle wheels his droning flight.

LASTLY, Collins, in his *Ode to Evening*, exhibits the same object more minutely.

Or where the beetle winds  
His small, but sullen horn,  
As oft he rises midst the twilight path,  
Against the pilgrim borne in heedless hum.

\* The cockchaffer; the insect meant in all the four passages.

SEVERAL

## NATURAL HISTORY. 9

SEVERAL other instances might be adduced of the introduction of the same circumstance into an evening landkip; but as they are chiefly to be met with in pieces of inferior reputation, it would be superfluous to particularize them. In all the preceding quotations the image is employed with propriety, and represented with elegance; but its successive adoption by so many different writers sufficiently evinces what I meant to deduce from it, a real want of variety in poetical imagery, proceeding from a scarcity of original observations of nature.

THE want of variety and novelty is not, however, the only defect of those poets who have occasionally introduced

## 10 POETICAL USE OF

ced the description of natural objects. It is no less common to find their descriptions faint, obscure, and ill characterized; the properties of things mistaken, and incongruous parts employed in the composition of the same picture. This is owing to a too cursory and general survey of objects, without exploring their minuter distinctions and mutual relations; and is only to be rectified by accurate and attentive observation, conducted upon somewhat of a scientific plan. As the artist who has not studied the body with anatomical precision, and examined the proportions of every limb, both with respect to its own several parts, and the whole system, cannot produce a just and harmonious representation of the human frame;

## NATURAL HISTORY. 11

frame; so the descriptive poet, who does not habituate himself to view the several objects of nature minutely, and in comparison with each other, must ever fail in giving his pictures the congruity and animation of real life.

As these defects constantly attend every writer of inferior rank, nothing would be easier than to multiply instances of them. I shall, however, confine myself to a few, which, that they may carry more weight, shall be drawn from respectable sources.

THE genius of the eastern poets; bold, ardent, and precipitate, was peculiarly averse to precision and accuracy. Hurried away by the warm emotions  
arising

## 12 POETICAL USE OF

arising from an idea forcibly impressed upon their minds, they often seem entirely to lose sight of the train of thought which the proposed subject would seem naturally to suggest.\* Hence their descriptions, however animated and striking in certain points, are seldom full and distinct enough to form accurate representations. I will venture to cite those highly celebrated zoological paintings in the book of Job in confirmation of this remark. In all of these it is found, that some one property of the animal, which it indeed possesses in an eminent degree, but not exclusively, gives the leading tone to the description, and occupies the whole

\* See the bishop of Oxford's truly classical and ingenious *Prefaces on Sacred Poetry*.

attention

## NATURAL HISTORY. 13

attention of the poet, to the neglect of every minuter, though perhaps more discriminating circumstance. Thus, the sole quality of the horse which is dwelt upon, is his courage in war. This, indeed, is pictured with great force and sublimity; but by images, many of which are equally applicable to any other warlike creature. Even the noble expression of "his neck being cloathed with thunder," is not so finely descriptive, because it is less appropriated, than the "*luxuriat toris animosum pectus*" of Virgil; and, for the same reason, I can scarcely agree with Mr. Warton in preferring the passage "He swalloweth the ground with fierceness and rage, neither believeth he that  
it



## 14 POETICAL USE OF

it is the found of the trumpet," to the lines

Stare loco nescit ; micat auribus, & tremit artus ;  
Collectumque premens volvitur sub naribus ignem.

THE indistinctness of most of the other descriptions in this book may be inferred from the very different opinions entertained by critics concerning the animals which the writer intended. Thus, the *bebemoth* is by some supposed to be the elephant, by others the hippopotamus. The *reem*, absurdly in our version rendered the unicorn, is variously interpreted the rhinoceros, urus, oryx, and bison. What is more extraordinary, the *leviatban*, to which a whole chapter is appropriated, has, with almost equal plausibility, been maintained

## NATURAL HISTORY. 15

tained to be the whale and the crocodile — a fish, and an amphibious quadruped. It may, indeed, be alleged, that the design of the poet in this place, which was to inculcate sublime ideas of the Divine Power and Majesty from considerations of the grandeur of his works, and sentiments of humiliation from the comparison of human strength and courage to those of other creatures, did not require, or even admit of minuteness in zoological description. Still, however, such want of precision in the great outlines of his figures, must be imputed to the prevalence of a characteristic manner, rather than to the decision of the judgment.

THIS

## 16 POETICAL USE OF

THIS fault, if we may venture to call it so, to which the oriental writers, from the peculiar cast of their genius, and an exuberance of that fire which constitutes the very essence of poetry, were liable, is not, however, that against which it is necessary to caution a modern poet. Want of knowledge, attention, or discernment, have occasioned those failures which the following instances are meant to exemplify.

LUCAN, a poet much more conversant with the schools of rhetoricians than with the works of nature, has contrived to shew great ignorance in a close and servile copy from Virgil. That writer, in a passage hereafter to be quoted, describes with admirable truth  
and

## NATURAL HISTORY. 17

and nature those presages of an impending storm which appear in the actions of certain animals. Among the rest, he mentions that of the heron's leaving its accustomed haunts in the marshes, and soaring to a great height in the air. This circumstance is thus varied in the representation by Lucan.

---

ausa volare  
Ardea sublimis, pennæ confisa natanti.

“THE heron dares to fly on high,  
trusting to its swimming feather.”

HE seems to have concluded that the heron, as a fowl conversant with water, must be a swimmer; whereas every one in the least acquainted with the history of this bird knows that it takes its prey

C

only

## 18 POETICAL USE OF

only by wading, for which its long legs are admirably adapted. Some of his commentators, indeed, have attempted to free him from the imputation of ignorance, by supposing that the epithet "*swimming* feather" was intended to denote that easy motion of a bird through the air which has often been resembled to sailing or swimming. But from the whole turn of the passage, it appears evident to me, that Lucan meant to improve upon his original by one of those antithetical points which on all occasions he so much delights to introduce : the images of *flying* and *swimming* are therefore set in opposition to each other ; and unless the latter be employed in its simple signification, the words "daring" and "trusting" are not at all applicable. Were even the other explanation.

## NATURAL HISTORY. 19

planation admitted, the smooth swimming motion would very ill apply to a bird which is remarkable for its heavy and laborious flight.

HIS variation of another circumstance in the same passage is equally erroneous. To the crow, which Virgil describes as stalking solitary over the dry sands, he also attributes the action which that poet rightly appropriates to water-fowl, of dashing the water over its body before stormy weather.

——caput spargens undis, velut occupet imbrem,  
Instabili gressu metitur litora cornix.

MR. WARTON'S translation of Virgil, though in general extremely chaste and correct, affords one instance of similar error in deviating from the original.

## 20 POETICAL USE OF

Behold for thee the neighb'ring raised crops  
The violet pale, and poppy's fragrant tops. *Ecl.* II.

THE epithet *fragrant* is the translator's addition; and an improper one; since that plant has only a faint disagreeable odour.

A MISTAKE, different in kind, since it relates to time rather than to quality, yet resembling in subject, appears in Pope's first pastoral. The rose is represented as blowing along with the crocus and violet; though, in reality, some months intervene betwixt their flowering.

Here the bright crocus and blue vi'let glow,  
Here western winds on breathing roses blow.

MANILIUS, in a short description of Africa, has improperly introduced the  
peaceful

## NATURAL HISTORY. 21

peaceful and innoxious elephant into an enumeration of the fierce and venomous animals which infest that torrid region.

Huic varias pestes, diversaque membra ferarum,  
Concessit bellis natura infesta futuris ;  
Horrendos angues, habitataque membra veneno,  
Et mortis partus, viventia crimina terræ ;  
Et vastos elephantes habet, sævosque leones,  
In pœnas sæcunda suas, parit horrida tellus.

ASTRONOM. lib. iv.

MR. CREECH, in his translation of this passage, has aggravated this impropriety almost to ridicule, by coupling the lion and elephant in one action, entirely unsuitable to the latter,

Here nature, angry with mankind, prepares  
Strange monsters, instruments of future wars ;  
Here snakes, those cells of poison, take their birth,  
Those living crimes and grievance of the earth ;

C 3

Fruitful



## 22 POETICAL USE OF

Fruitful in its own plagues, the desert shore  
Hears elephants and frightful lions roar.

SHAKESPEARE, in *the two Gentlemen of Verona*, gives the following beautiful lines to the banished Valentine.

Here can I sit alone, unseen of any,  
And to the nightingale's complaining notes  
Tune my distresses, and record my woes.

THE plaintive character of the nightingale renders its introduction pleasing and proper ; but Congreve, in a passage apparently imitated from this, has spoiled the image by transferring it to the lark, whose character is always cheerful and sprightly.

The morning lark to mine accords his note,  
And tunes to my distress his warbling throat.

It has been already observed that the leviathan of Job is variously understood  
by

## NATURAL HISTORY. 23

by critics for the whale and the crocodile. Both these animals are remarkable for the smallness of their eyes in proportion to the bulk of their bodies. Those of the crocodile are indeed said to be extremely piercing out of the water ; in which sense, therefore, the poet's expression that " its eyes are like the eyelids of the morning " can only be applicable. Dr. Young, however, in his paraphrase on this part of Job, describing the crocodile as the animal intended in the original, has given the image an erroneous reference to the magnitude, rather than the brightness of its eye.

Large is his front ; and when his burnish'd eyes  
Lift their *broad* lids, the morning seems to rise.\*

\* HERODOTUS, speaking of the crocodile, says, that it has the eyes of a hog : ἔχει δὲ ὀφθαλμούς μιν, ὕος : Lib. II. A striking contrast to the image given of them by the poet, taken in any sense.

## 24 POETICAL USE OF

THESE instances might be infinitely multiplied, were we to include those false representations of nature which ancient error or fable first introduced, but which, having been made the foundation of ingenious figures and pleasing allusions, the poets of every age have adopted. Such are, the song of the dying swan; the halcyon's nest; the crocodile's tears; the pelican's feeding her young with her blood; and the whole existence of the phoenix. When we recollect the multitude of beautiful images and descriptions formed upon these fictions, and that the very language of poetry is in many instances derived from them, we shall be apt to regard them not only with indulgence, but veneration. Yet, on the other hand, if we adhere to this unquestionable principle,  
that

## NATURAL HISTORY. 25

that nothing can be really beautiful which has not truth for its basis ; if we attend to the boundless variety of genuine beauties, applicable to every purpose of ornament, which nature liberally scatters around us ; if we reflect on the danger of suffering falsehood and error habitually to intrude even in matters of the slightest importance ; we shall scarcely give our assent to a licence, as unnecessary as it is hazardous. A modern writer can lose nothing by this rigour ; for since both true and false wit have so long been employed upon these topics, every thing brilliant or ingenious which they can suggest, must have long since been exhausted ; and the revival of them at present is as much a proof of barren invention as of false taste.

WHERE

## 26 POETICAL USE OF

WHERE the professed intention of the poet is the description of natural objects, it cannot be doubted that every fabulous idea should be religiously avoided. Thus, it has been remarked by Mr. Pennant, in his *British Zoology*, that Virgil, who, in speaking figuratively of the swan as the poet's bird, ascribes to it its usual musical attributes, when he mentions it under its proper character of a water-fowl, gives it the harsh note really belonging to that order of birds.

Dant sonitum *rauci* per stagna loquacia cygni.

*Æn.* IX. 458.

The hoarse swans scream along the sounding marsh.

ON the other hand, Lucretius has adopted the fabulous notion of the swan, even in the exemplification of a philosophical

## NATURAL HISTORY. 27

phical proposition. Speaking of the different nature of sounds, he says,

*Nec simili penetrant aureis primordia forma,  
Quom tuba depresso graviter sub murmure mugit,  
Aut roboant raucum retrocita cornua bombum,  
Valibus et cycni gelidis orti ex Heliconis  
Cum liquidam tollunt lugubri voce querelam.*

LIB. IV.

Nor are the figures of the seeds alike,  
Which from the grave and murm'ring trumpet  
strike,  
To those of dying swans, whose latest breath  
In mournful strains laments approaching death.

CREECH.

AND in another passage he blends this fiction with reality in a manner equally injudicious.

*Parvus ut est cycni melior canor, ille gruum quam  
Clamor, in ætheriis dispersus nubibus Austri.*

IBID.

As

## 28 POETICAL USE OF

As the low warbling of the swan excels  
The crane's loud clangor, scatter'd thro' the  
clouds. \*

THIS latter passage, as well as the line above quoted from Virgil, is part of a simile; whence I take occasion to remark, that, as it is the business of every figure of comparison either to illustrate or to enforce the simple idea, it is certainly requisite that they should be founded upon circumstances to which the mind of the reader can assent; otherwise they can produce little effect. The writer of *Scriblerus* gives a ludicrous example of a simile built upon fiction,

Thus have I seen in Araby the blest  
A phoenix couch'd upon her funeral nest;

\* CREECH's translation of these lines is so very inadequate as to give no idea of the original.

a fight

## NATURAL HISTORY. 29

a sight which neither the author, nor any one else, ever did see. Obvious as the absurdity here is, the following passage in Milton, though written quite in the spirit of that divine poet, stands upon the very same ground of censure..

As when a gryffon thro' the wildernesse  
With winged course, o'er hill or moory dale  
Pursues the Arimaspean, who by stealth  
Has from his wakeful custody purloin'd  
The guarded gold.

PARAD. LOST.

PERHAPS, in a modern writer we should require an adherence to truth, even in the representation of those higher and less obvious parts of the œconomy of nature which come under the survey of philosophy. The Copernican theory of the solar system has been now long enough established to take place  
of



## 30 POETICAL USE OF

of the Ptolemaic even in poetical allusion; and the sun, tranquilly seated in the centre of its vast dependencies, cheering, invigorating, and animating the whole, may, on every occasion of sublime imagery, supercede the chariot of Phœbus, for ever painfully dragged round the petty globe we inhabit. How inexcusable is the reasoning, the philosophical Dr. Young in adopting an absurd notion entertained by some of the fathers, that the final conflagration of the world will begin at midnight; as if it were possible for night at any one instant to be universal on the globe, or an equal portion of the earth were not always illuminated by the sun!

At midnight, when mankind is wrapt in peace,  
And worldly fancy feeds on golden dreams,

To

## NATURAL HISTORY. 31

To give more dread to man's most dreadful hour,  
At midnight, 'tis presum'd, this pomp will burst  
From tenfold darkness.

### NIGHT THOUGHTS.

· EVEN in the more confined parts of knowledge, with which it is not requisite for a person of liberal education to be intimately acquainted, exploded errors should be avoided, whenever it is thought proper to introduce such subjects. Allusions to chemistry were extremely fashionable in the poetry of the last century ; but so many false opinions were then received into that science, that the same images would give disgust rather than pleasure to one acquainted with it in its present state of improvement. The fancied revivification of a flower from its ashes, which furnished a topic for the wit of Cowley and

D'avenant,

## 32 POETICAL USE OF

D'avenant, could scarcely be employed to advantage by a modern writer.

ON the whole, although fictions of some kind have been justly accounted the very soul of poetry, and cannot be rejected without depriving it of its choicest ornaments, yet false representations of natural things, the real properties of which are commonly known, and are equally capable of poetical use, cannot stand the test of sound criticism. And especially, the trite and hackneyed fables of ancient poets, when copied by modern writers, must appear as frigid and uninteresting as they are extravagant and unnatural.

HITHERTO it has been chiefly attempted to shew that the accurate and  
scientific

## NATURAL HISTORY. 33

scientific study of nature would obviate many of the *defects* usually discoverable in poetical compositions. The more pleasing task succeeds, of exhibiting to view the *beauties* which the poet may derive from this source. And here, I shall first remark, that every part of natural history does not seem equally capable of affording poetical imagery. The vegetable creation, delightful as it is to the senses, and extensive in utility, yields comparatively few materials to the poet, whose art is principally defective in representing those qualities in which *it* chiefly excels; colour, scent, and taste. The mineral kingdom is still more sterile, and uncommo-  
dated to description. The animal race, who, in common with their human lord and head, have, almost universally,  
D                      somewhat

## 34 POETICAL USE OF

somewhat of moral and intellectual character ; whose motions, habitations, and pursuits, are so infinitely and curiously varied ; and whose connection with man arises to a sort of companionship and mutual attachment ; seem on these accounts peculiarly adapted to the purposes of poetry. Separately considered, they afford matter for pleasing and even sublime speculation ; in the rural landskip they give animation to the objects around them ; and viewed in comparison with human kind, they suggest amusing and instructive lessons. That part of natural history termed zoology has therefore almost solely furnished the subjects of the ensuing pages.

To shew, by examples drawn from those poets who have eminently succeeded

ed

## NATURAL HISTORY. 35

ed in descriptions of animal nature, that this source has actually been productive of beauties of the most striking kind; and to point out from the writers in natural history some new objects which might have improved the poetry of past, or may adorn that of future composers, will be the attempt of the remaining part of this Essay.

No writer among the ancients appears to have made a more advantageous use of zoological observations than Virgil. This great poet, whose reputation has, perhaps, been injured by his excellencies, since a nice attention to correctness and harmony is usually thought incompatible with exalted genius, had, in reality, all that enthusiastic fondness for the beauties of nature

## 36 POETICAL USE OF

which universally accompanies a sublime and vigorous imagination. Of the three kinds of poetical composition in which he engaged, one alone, however, gave free scope to his talents for original description. In pastoral and epic poetry he was an imitator; but the *Georgics* were his own; \* his favourite and finished work; in which his genius displayed itself, free from every restraint, except such as the plan of a didactic poem necessarily imposed. It accordingly contains a larger share of natural beauties than any other production, ancient or modern, Thomson's *Seasons* excepted, which had the advantage of a still more enlarged and unencumbered

\* THE rude sketch of Hesiod can scarcely be accounted even a distant model of Virgil's *Georgics*.

plan.

## NATURAL HISTORY. 37

plan. Some of these I shall select for the purposes of this Essay.

AMONG the prognostics of an impending storm, related in the first Georgic, those derived from the actions of certain animals are singularly picturesque. Many of these, it is true, are borrowed from Aratus, a Greek poet; but they are all so improved by the masterly hand of Virgil, as well in the addition of new circumstances, as the superior force and beauty of the diction, that they become, in great measure, his own. What truth, variety, and distinctness in the following images!

Cum medio celeres revolant ex æquore Mergi,  
Clamoremq; ferunt ad litora, cumque marinæ



### 38 POETICAL USE OF

In ficco ludunt Fulicæ : notasque paludes  
Deferit, atque altam supra volat Ardea \* nubem.

When loud the Corm'rant screams, and seeks the  
land,

And Coots and Sea-gulls sport upon the sand ;  
And the tall Hern his marshy haunts forsakes,  
And tow'rs to heav'n above the custom'd lakes.

WARTON.

————— numquam imprudentibus imber  
Obfuit. aut illum surgentem vallibus imis  
Aëriæ fugere Grues : aut Bucula cælum  
Suspiciens, patulis captavit naribus auras :  
Aut arguta lacus circumvolitavit Hirundo :  
Et veterem in limo Ranæ cecinere querelam.  
Sæpius & tectis penetralibus extulit ova  
Angustum Formica terens iter —————

\* THE Bittern is thought by Mr. Pennant to be the species of Heron here meant, from the observation of Willughby that this bird in autumn soars into the air with a spiral ascent to a great height, making at the same time a singular noise. *Penn. Br. Zool.*

— et

## NATURAL HISTORY. 39

————— et e pastu decedens agmine magno  
 Corvorum increpuit densis exercitus alis.  
 Jam varias pelagi volucres, & quæ Asia circum  
 Dulcibus in stagnis rimantur prata Caystri,  
 Certatim largos humeris infundere rores ;  
 Nunc caput objectare fretis, nunc currere in undas,  
 Et studio incassum videas gestire lavandi.  
 Tum Cornix plena pluvium vocat improba voce,  
 Et sola in ficca secum spatiatur arena.

Sure warnings still the stormy showers precede ;  
 The conscious Cranes forsake the vapoury mead,  
 The Heifer tossing high her head in air,  
 With broader nostrils snuffs the gale afar ;  
 Light skims the chirping Swallow o'er the flood,  
 The Frogs croak hoarsely on their beds of mud ;  
 Her eggs abroad the prudent Pismire bears,  
 While at her work a narrow road she wears.

————— on rustling pinions loud  
 The Crows, \* a numerous host ! from pasture  
 homeward crowd,

D 4

Eo !

\* MR. PENNANT supposes the *Corvus* of Virgil to be the  
 Rook, as the only species of the kind which is gregarious ;  
 and

## 40 POETICAL USE OF

Lo ! various sea-fowl, and each bird that breeds  
 In Asian lakes, near sweet Cayster's meads,  
 O'er their smooth shoulders strive the stream to  
     fling,

And wash in wanton sport each snowy wing ;  
 Now dive, now run upon the wat'ry plain,  
 And long to lave their downy plumes in vain :  
 Loudly the rains the boding Rook demands,  
 And solitary stalks across the scorching sands.

WARTON.

THE approaching return of fair weather is likewise marked out by tokens drawn from the animal creation. One of these forms an extremely natural and pleasing picture.

Tum liquidas Corvi, presso ter gutture voces  
 Aut quater ingeminant : et sæpe cubilibus altis,  
 Nescio qua præter solitum dulcedine læti,

and the *Cornix*, mentioned a few lines below, and translated Rook, the Carrion Crow. *Br. Zool.*

Inter

## NATURAL HISTORY. 41

Inter se foliis strepitant: juvat imbris actis;  
Progeniem parvam, dulcesque revifere nidos.

With throats compress'd, with shrill and clearer  
voice,

The tempest gone, the cawing Rooks rejoice;  
Seek with unusual joys, on branches hung  
Their much lov'd nests, and feed their callow  
young.

WARTON.

It is observable that Thomson, who studied nature so attentively as well to merit the epithet given him by Mr. Pennant of *the Naturalist's Poet*, has almost translated Virgil's prognostics of the weather, scarcely adding a single circumstance. We shall presently, however, find sufficient occasion to display his unrivalled excellence in delineations from nature.

THE

## 42 POETICAL USE OF

THE subjects of the third and fourth Georgics are expressly zoological, and afford many fine passages in which the poet's accurate attention to natural history is evinced. It is worthy of observation, that he has, in a manner, confined his claim of originality to these books; introducing them with a declaration that every other subject of poetry is already exhausted. If this could be said with truth in the time of Virgil, how much more forcibly will it apply to the state of poetry in our days?

FROM the third Georgic I shall select a passage more simply and purely descriptive than perhaps any other to be met with in poetry. It is indeed so circumstantial and exact that it might almost answer the purpose of a naturalist,  
and

NATURAL HISTORY. 43

and yet so replete with glowing expression and lively fancy, that scarcely any thing can be more characteristic of the poet.—A striking example how happily their respective ideas may be blended ! This is the celebrated description of the Calabrian *Cheersydus*.

Est etiam ille malus Calabris in saltibus anguis,  
Squamea convolvens sub lato pectore terga,  
Atque notis longam maculosus grandibus alvum :  
Qui, dum amnes ulli rumpuntur fontibus, & dum  
Vere madent udo terræ ac pluvialibus austris,  
Stagna colit, ripisque habitans, hic piscibus  
atram

Improbis ingluviem ranisque loquacibus explet.  
Postquam exusta palus, terræque ardore dehiscunt,  
Exilit in siccum, & flammantia lumina torquens  
Sævit agris, asperque siti atque exterritus æstu.  
Ne mihi tum molles sub dño carpere somnos,  
Neq̃ dorso nemoris libeat jacuisse per herbas :  
Cum, positis novis exuviis, nitidusque juvena,  
Volvitur,

## 44 POETICAL USE OF

*Volvitur, aut catulos testis aut ova relinquens,  
Arduus ad solem, & linguis micat ore trifulcis.*

Calabria's forests breed a baneful snake,  
With lofty breast elate, and scaly back,  
And with broad spots his winding belly black : }  
Who, when the rivers burst their rocky bounds,  
And southern showers bedew the vernal grounds,  
Haunts the moist bank, and in the wat'ry bogs  
Swells his dire paunch with fish, and croaking  
frogs :

But when keen heat the fens of moisture drains,  
And cleaves the glebe, he rages o'er the plains,  
While mad with thirst, and fill'd with drear  
amaze,

At the fierce beam his rolling eye-lids blaze.  
May ne'er soft sleep on a green bank, surprise,  
Fast by some forest-side, my drooping eyes,  
When cast his skin, and sleek in youthful prime,  
Recent he rides, before the sun sublime ;  
Regardless of the nest, deserts his young,  
And brandishes and darts his triple-forked tongue.

WARTON.

THE

## NATURAL HISTORY. 45

THE fourth Georgic is a complete history of a single animal, the bee; and contains almost every thing that has been known and believed concerning this insect down to the time of Swammerdam and Reaumur. Pliny's minute and curious account of the bee is in great part copied from Virgil: but this writer, who may be termed a *poetical Naturalist*, has added some little picturesque circumstances which would have appeared to advantage in the poem: Conformably to the proposed design of shewing what might have been done, as well as what has been done, in enriching poetry from the stores of natural history, I shall here insert some passages from Pliny which, in this view, appeared most striking.

“IN-



## 46 POETICAL USE OF

"INTERDIU statio ad portas more  
 "castrorum, noctu quies in matutinum,  
 "donec una excitet gemino aut triplici  
 "bombo, ut buccino aliquo. Tunc  
 "universi provolant. ——— Quum  
 "advesperascit, in alveo strepunt mi-  
 "nus ac minus, donec una circumvo-  
 "let eodem, quo excitavit, bombo :  
 "et hoc castrorum more. Tunc re-  
 "pente omnes conticescunt." "In the  
 day time a sentry is placed at the en-  
 trance of the hive, as in a camp. In  
 the night all are quiet till morning ;  
 when one awakens the rest with a loud  
 buz two or three times repeated, like  
 a trumpet. Then they all fly abroad.——  
 At the approach of evening the noise  
 of the hive gradually decreases, till at  
 length one flies round with the same buz  
 that was the morning signal ; when  
 they

they are all instantly hushed." . Even that part which Virgil has so highly laboured, the homage and adoration paid by the bees to their king, would admit of a heightening from Pliny. When he goes abroad, the swarm not only crowd around him with awe and admiration, but conceal him from sight; "*cerni non patitur.*" Each wishes to be near him, and rejoices to be beheld by him in his duty. Wherever he alights, there the whole host encamp. "*Se quæque proximam illi cupit esse, et in officio conspici gaudent.* Ubi cunque ille confedit, ibi cunctarum castra sunt."

MILTON, a poet confessedly supreme in the regions of fancy, has, in numerous instances, shewn an equal familiarity

ty

## 48 POETICAL USE OF

ty with the walks of nature. The garden of Eden, the most delicious rural scene that imagination ever painted, was not furnished by hackneyed ideas drawn from pastoral poetry, but by that piercing and intelligent survey through real objects, which seizes and appropriates to its own use each devious scattered beauty. Every flowery versifier has materials at hand for a lover's bower; but a botanist\* alone could have culled and sorted the plants which compose the charming bower of Eve.

\* THE reader will note, that this term, as well as that of naturalist, is not, in the present Essay, confined to the adept in systems and proficient in names: it is intended to comprise every one who surveys natural objects with a searching and distinguishing eye; whether he consider them singly, or as parts of a system, whether he call them by their trivial or learned appellations,

— the

the roof  
 Of thickest covert was inwoven shade  
 Laurel and myrtle, and what higher grew  
 Of firm and fragrant leaf; on either side  
 Acanthus, and each odorous bushy shrub  
 Fenc'd up the verdant wall; each beauteous flower,  
 Iris all hues, roses and jessamin  
 Rear'd high their flourish'd heads between, and  
     wrought  
 Mosaic; underfoot the violet,  
 Crocus and hyacinth with rich inlay  
 Broider'd the ground.

PAR. LOST, BOOK IV.

IN the same masterly style of description are those zoological sketches, introduced in the account of the creation, BOOK VII. At the great primæval command "Be fruitful and multiply" what a living scene instantly rises to view.

Forthwith the sounds and seas, each creek and bay  
 With fry innumerable swarm, and shoals

E

Of

## 50 POETICAL USE OF

Of fish that with their fins and shining scales  
 Glide under the green wave, in sculls that oft  
 Bank the mid sea : part single or with mate  
 Graze the sea weed their pasture, and through  
                  groves

Of coral stray, or sporting with quick glance  
 Show to the sun their wav'd coats dropt with gold,  
 Or in their pearly shells at ease, attend  
 Moist nutriment, or under rocks their food  
 In jointed armour watch : on smooth the seal  
 And bended dolphins play : part huge of bulk  
 Wallowing unwieldy, enormous in their gate  
 Tempest the ocean : there Leviathan,  
 Hugest of living creatures, on the deep  
 Stretch'd like a promontory sleeps or swims  
 And seems a moving land, and at his gills  
 Draws in, and at his trunk spouts out a sea.

THE imagery still heightens when the  
 winged race are described.

---

there the eagle and the stork  
 On cliffs and cedar tops their eyries build :

Part

## NATURAL HISTORY. 51

Part loosely wing the region, part more wise  
In common, rang'd in figure wedge their way,  
Intelligent of seasons, and set forth  
Their aery caravan high over seas  
Flying, and over lands with mutual wing  
Easing their flight; so steers the prudent crane  
Her annual voyage, borne on winds; the air  
Flotes as they pass, fann'd with unnumber'd  
plumes:

From branch to branch the smaller birds with  
song  
Solac'd the woods, and spread their painted wings  
Till ev'n, nor then the solemn nightingale  
Ceas'd warbling, but all night tun'd her soft lays:  
Others on silver lakes and rivers bath'd  
Their downy breast; the swan with arched neck  
Between her white wings mantling proudly, rows  
Her state with oary feet; yet oft they quit  
The dank, and rising on stiff pennons, tower  
The mid aerial sky: others on ground  
Walk'd firm; the crested cock whose clarion  
sounds

The silent hours, and th'other whose gay train

52 POETICAL USE OF

Adorns him, colour'd with the florid hue  
Of rainbows and starry eyes.

MR. PENNANT, who, whenever his subject will admit of it, joins the elegant critic to the accurate naturalist, remarks upon the exquisite picture of the swan in the foregoing lines, that the poet had probably in his eye this beautiful passage of *Silius Italicus*.

Haud secus Eridani stagnis, ripæve Caystri  
Innatat albus olor, pronoque immobile corpus  
Dat fluvio, & pedibus tacitas eremigat undas.

THE reader will pardon the following very inadequate translation.

Thus on the Po, or sweet Cayster's stream,  
Swims the white swan, and all his moveless form  
Gives to the headlong current, while beneath,  
With oary feet he scoops the silent wave.

IMAGES

## NATURAL HISTORY. 53

IMAGES drawn from the animal creation make a part of the painting in those most delightful of all descriptive poems, the *Allegro* and *Penferoso*; and the lark, cock, and nightingale admirably enliven and accord with the scenes in which they are introduced. Of these, the uncommon beauty with which the lark is described, has never, perhaps, been sufficiently noted,

To hear the Lark begin his flight,  
And, singing, startle the dull night,  
From his watch-tower in the skies,  
'Ere the dappled dawn doth rise.

THE sudden, shrill burst of song with which this bird salutes the earliest approaches of day, could not be more characteristically expressed than by the highly poetical idea of its "startling



## 54 POETICAL USE OF

the dull night;”\* and they who have remarked the vast height to which the sky-lark soars, and his suspension in the air in the midst of his musical exertions, will be struck with the sublime image of his sky-built watch-tower. †

\* Probably suggested by this of Shakespeare.

Steed threatens steed in high and boastful neighs,  
Piercing the night's dull ear.

HENRY V.

† THE late Dr. Goldsmith, who seems to have been a Naturalist only of the bookseller's making, but was a poet of nature's creation, has many descriptions in his *History of Animated Nature* that are wrought with peculiar warmth of fancy and strength of colouring. The following, of the sky-lark's song, is equally correct and picturesque. “Nothing can be more pleasing than to see the lark warbling upon the wing; raising its note as it soars until it seems lost in the immense heights above us; the note continuing, the bird itself unseen; to see it then descending with a swell as it comes from the clouds, yet sinking by degrees as it approaches its nest, the spot where all its affections are centered; the spot that has prompted all this joy.” Pliny has nothing more rich, delicate, and expressive!

NUMEROUS

## NATURAL HISTORY. 55

NUMEROUS have been the imitations of these celebrated pieces, and very different in point of merit. The generality of imitators have borrowed their materials almost entirely from the originals, varying a little their form and arrangement. Some, however, have taken only the general cast of character and expression from Milton, and have ventured to look abroad for new imagery. Of these, none appears to me more successful than the author of a poem in Doddsley's Collection, vol. VI. entitled *Vacation*. In this sprightly piece, a variety of gay and pleasing objects, similar in kind, yet individually different from those of the *Allegro*, are introduced in rapid succession; of which, the following, derived from *our* source, shew

## 56 POETICAL USE OF

the masterly hand of an attentive and elegant observer of nature,

—— in pastures rich below  
Among the grazing cattle, slow  
Moves the bull with heavy tread,  
Hanging down his lumpish head.  
And the proud steed neigheth oft  
Shaking his wanton mane aloft.

---



---

—— the hoarse-voic'd hungry rook  
Near her stick-built nest doth croak,  
Waving on the topmost bough ;  
And the master itag below  
Bellows loud with savage roar  
Stalking all his hinds before.

---



---

—— the bat with dusky wings  
Flutters round in giddy rings,  
And the buzzing chaffers come  
Close by mine ear in solemn hum.

THE

## NATURAL HISTORY. 57

THE two last lines might be added to the instances adduced in the beginning of this Essay, of the introduction of the same image by different writers; and I know not whether it be not more naturally represented here than in any of them,

BUT it is in that truly excellent and original poem, Thomson's *Seasons*, that we are to look for the greatest variety of genuine observations in natural history, and particularly in that part of it which regards the animal creation. And here I shall just remark, that the merited success of this piece has proved a refutation of those critics who deny that description can properly be the sole object of a poem, and would only admit of its occasional introduction as part of a narra-

## 58 POETICAL USE OF

a narrative, didactic, or moral design. Why, indeed, it might have been asked, should poetry be clogged with matter so unfavourable to her exertions, as historical relations, philosophical systems, or the rules of an art? Why not allow her the same privilege as her Sister-Muse, who is at liberty to employ her pencil on what parts of nature she most delights in, and may exhibit the rural landscape, without encumbering herself with the mechanism of a plough, or the œconomy of the husbandman? If Virgil really designed to instruct the farmer by his *Georgics*, he might have done it much more effectually in plain prose: if it was his purpose to inspire a true relish for the beauties of nature, to write an original poem of a higher cast than the confined plan of pastoral would allow,

we

## NATURAL HISTORY. 59

we may lament that he pursued a plan that necessarily threw so much of his work into details which even his versification cannot render pleasing. I mean not here to enter at large into a disquisition concerning didactic poetry ; but only to suggest a comparison between the result of Thomson's unconfined plan, scarcely less extensive than nature itself, and that of some other writers, not inferior in genius, who thought it necessary to shackle themselves with teaching an art, or inculcating a system.\*

IN

\* THE sentiments of the elegant Essayist *on the writings and genius of Pope*, concerning descriptive Poetry, though not altogether so heretical as those I have hazarded, are yet too much of the same cast, not to make me desirous of citing their authority. He says, " Mr. Pope it seems was of opinion, that descriptive poetry is a composition as absurd as a feast made up of fauces: and I know many other persons that think meanly of it. I will not presume to say it

" is

## 60 POETICAL USE OF

IN selecting examples of zoological description from the *Seasons*, the number of those entitled to applause is a source of embarrassment; and I shall be obliged, through apprehension of exceeding the limits I would prescribe to this Essay, to omit several passages, equal perhaps in beauty to those extracted.

THE first page affords a pleasing spe-

"is equal, either in dignity or utility, to those compositions  
 "that lay open the internal constitution of man, and that  
 "IMITATE characters, manners, and sentiments. I may  
 "however remind such contemners of it, that, in a sister-art,  
 "landscape-painting claims the very next rank to history-  
 "painting; being ever preferred to single portraits, to pieces  
 "of still-life, to droll figures, to fruit and flower-pieces;  
 "that Titian thought it no diminution of his genius, to  
 "spend much of his time in works of the former species;  
 "and that, if their principles lead them to condemn Thom-  
 "son, they must also condemn the Georgics of Virgil, and  
 "the greatest part of the noblest descriptive poem extant, I  
 "mean, that of Lucretius."

cimen

## NATURAL HISTORY. 61

cimen of that natural calendar which some ingenious writers have attempted to establish on the concurrence of changes in the seasons with certain appearances in the animal and vegetable creation. The unsettled state between the termination of winter and the beginning of spring, when each by turns exercises dominion over the dubious year, is represented by the picturesque circumstances, that

---

scarce

The Bittern knows his time, with bill ingulph'd  
To shake the sounding marsh ; or from the shore  
The Plovers when to scatter o'er the heath,  
And sing their wild notes to the listening waste.

BUT the soft vernal season is fully confirmed, when that delightful theme opens on the poet, which he emphatically  
calls



## 62 POETICAL USE OF

calls *the Passion of the groves*. In how superior a strain to the herd of copyists and imitators, has this *designer from nature* exhibited a subject of all others the most common in rural description, the music of birds !

---

Up-springs the lark,  
 Shrill-voic'd and loud, the messenger of morn ;  
 Ere yet the shadows fly, he mounted sings  
 Amid the dawning clouds, and from their haunts  
 Calls up the tuneful nations. Every copse  
 Deep-tangled, tree irregular, and bush  
 Bending with dewy moisture, o'er the heads  
 Of the coy quiristers that lodge within,  
 Are prodigal of harmony. The thrush  
 And wood-lark, o'er the kind-contending throng  
 Superior heard, run through the sweetest length  
 Of notes ; when listening Philomela deigns  
 To let them joy, and purposes, in thought  
 Elate, to make her night excel their day.  
 The black-bird whistles from the thorny brake ;  
 The

## NATURAL HISTORY. 63

The mellow bullfinch\* answers from the grove :  
Nor are the linnets, o'er the flowering furze  
Pour'd out profusely, silent. Join'd to these  
Innumerable songsters, in the freshening shade  
Of new-sprung leaves, their modulations mix  
Mellifluous. The jay, the rook, the daw,  
And each harsh pipe, discordant heard alone,  
Aid the full concert : while the stock-dove breathes  
A melancholy murmur thro' the whole.

THE introduction of some of the harsher tones as an agreeable addition to the sylvan concert, is a new idea, and as well musically as poetically proper. But poetry has a privilege beyond music in this respect, and might produce harmony from a combination of notes all jarring and discordant, if they were in unison with some natural scene

\* *HEZZ* is a slight error in the description, the wild note of this bird being harsh and disagreeable, and the *mellowness* only acquired by teaching.

which

## 64 POETICAL USE OF

which from its novelty or grandeur afforded a fit subject for description. Every reader of taste will be convinced of the truth of this assertion by the following passage, which wants only the form of verse to be truly poetical.

“ The notes of all the sea-birds (says  
“ Mr. Pennant in his *British Zoology*)  
“ are extremely harsh or inharmonious.  
“ We have often rested under the rocks  
“ attentive to the various sounds over  
“ our heads, which, mixed with the  
“ solemn roar of the waves swelling into  
“ and retiring from the vast caverns beneath,  
“ have produced a fine effect.  
“ The sharp voice of the sea-gulls, the  
“ frequent chatter of the guillemots, the  
“ loud note of the auks, the scream of  
“ the herons, together with the hoarse,  
“ deep, periodical croak of the corvo-  
“ rants,

## NATURAL HISTORY. 65

“ rants, which serves as a base to the  
“ rest, have often furnished us with a  
“ concert, which joined with the wild  
“ scenery that surrounded us, afforded,  
“ in a high degree, that species of plea-  
“ sure, which arises from the novelty,  
“ and, we may say, gloomy grandeur  
“ of the entertainment. ”

To return to our poet. After the  
amorous concert has produced its ef-  
fect in disposing the fair auditors to  
form “ connubial leagues ” with the  
performers, how natural and pleasing  
the description of their first domestic  
cares in chusing a situation for their  
nests, and building them !

---

Some to the holly-hedge  
Nestling repair, and to the thicket some ;  
Some to the rude protection of the thorn

F

Commit

## 66 POETICAL USE OF

Commit their feeble offspring : the cleft tree  
 Offers its kind concealment to a few,  
 Their food its insects, and its moss their nests.  
 Others apart, far in the grassy dale,  
 Or roughening waste, their humble texture weave.  
 But most in woodland solitudes delight,  
 In unfrequented glooms, or shaggy banks,  
 Steep, and divided by a babb'ling brook,  
 Whose murmurs soothe them all the live-long  
                   day,

When by kind duty fix'd. Among the roots  
 Of hazel, pendant o'er the plaintive stream,  
 They frame the first foundation of their domes ;  
 Dry sprigs of trees, in artful fabric laid,  
 And bound with clay together. Now 'tis nought  
 But restless hurry thro' the busy air,  
 Beat by unnumber'd wings. The swallow sweeps  
 The slimy pool, to build his hanging house  
 Intent. And often, from the careless back  
 Of herds and flocks, a thousand tugging bills  
 Pluck hair and wool : and oft, when unobserv'd  
 Steal from the barn a straw : till soft and warm,  
 Clean and complete, their habitation grows.

WITH

## NATURAL HISTORY. 67.

WITH the same truth, delicacy, and minuteness are described the other offices of the parental charge among the pleasing inhabitants of the grove: fitting, hatching, rearing their young, protecting them from danger, and teaching them to fly. All these are original pieces; for no poet before Thomson had thought of *studying* in fields and woods. It is said of that admirable designer of wild animals, Mr. Ridinger of Vienna, that he has frequently passed whole nights in the depths of forests for the purpose of viewing the fierce and solitary inhabitants in their native abodes, with all the actions and manners of their savage state. It cannot be doubted that Thomson must have bestowed equal attention and diligence in examining those parts

## 68 POETICAL USE OF

of animated nature which occupy so distinguished a place in his paintings.

THE descriptions referred to above, have all a character of elegance, gayety, or softness; the following rises to sublimity.

High from the summit of a craggy cliff  
Hung o'er the deep, such as amazing frowns  
On utmost Kilda's shore, whose lonely race  
Resign the setting sun to distant worlds,  
The royal eagle draws his vigorous young,  
Strong pounc'd, and ardent with paternal fire.  
Now fit to raise a kingdom of their own,  
He drives them from his fort, the towering feat,  
For ages, of his empire; which in peace,  
Unstain'd he holds, while many a league at sea  
He wings his course, and preys in distant isles.

THE circumstance of the parent eagles' driving their young, as soon as reared,

## NATURAL HISTORY. 69

reared, from the limits of their kingdom, is not only poetical, but agreeable to ancient observation. Pliny relates it with his usual elegance. "Adultos "persequitur parens, et longé fugat, "æmulos scilicet rapinæ. Et alioqui "unum par aquilarum magno ad popu- "landum tractu, ut fatietur, indiget." "The parent bird pursues its adult young, and drives them afar, as rivals in rapine. For a single pair of eagles requires a large tract for preying in, to provide a sufficiency of food."

A PLEASING contrast to the manners of this solitary tyrant is exhibited in those of the various kinds of domestic fowl; which are thus grouped in a truly rural landscape.



70 POETICAL USE OF

Should I my steps turn to the rural seat,  
 Whose lofty elms, and venerable oaks,  
 Invite the rook, who high amid the boughs,  
 In early Spring, his airy city builds,  
 And ceaseless caws amusive; there, well-pleas'd,  
 I might the various polity survey  
 Of the mixt household kind. The careful hen  
 Calls all her chirping family around,  
 Fed and defended by the fearless cock;  
 Whose breast with ardour flames, as on he walks,  
 Graceful, and crows defiance. In the pond,  
 The finely-checker'd duck, before her train,  
 Rows garrulous. The stately-sailing swan  
 Gives out his snowy plumage to the gale;  
 And, arching proud his neck, with oary feet  
 Bears forward fierce, and guards his osier isle,  
 Protective of his young. The turkey nigh,  
 Loud-threatning, reddens; while the peacock  
 spreads

His every-colour'd glory to the sun,  
 And swims in radiant majesty along.  
 O'er the whole homely scene, the cooing dove  
 Flies thick in amorous chace, and wanton rolls  
 The glancing eye, and turns the changeful neck.

WERE

## NATURAL HISTORY. 71

WERE it not that this author affords the most perfect examples of those beauties which I would propose for imitation, I should apprehend being thought altogether unreasonable in quotations from him. But, presuming upon the reader's indulgence on this account, I shall venture to transcribe one other passage, in which our painter, who unites all the minuteness and accuracy of the Flemish, with the beauty and grandeur of the Roman school, has drawn a scene so surprisingly natural, that our perception of it is no less lively than if it really existed before our eyes. It is perfect still life; the representation of a hot summer's noon.

---

The daw,  
The rook and magpie, to the grey-grown oaks  
That the calm village in their verdant arms,

## 72 POETICAL USE OF

Sheltering, embrace, direct their lazy flight ;  
 Where on the mingling boughs they sit embower'd,  
 All the hot noon, till cooler hours arise.  
 Faint, underneath, the household fowls convene ;  
 And in a corner of the buzzing shade,  
 The house-dog, with the vacant grey-hound, lies  
 Out-stretch'd and sleepy. In his slumbers one  
 Attacks the nightly thief, and one exults  
 O'er hill and dale ; till, wakened by the wasp,  
 They, starting, snap.

A STRIKING instance of the extraordinary effect of a well-chosen epithet in adding life and force to a description, is shewn in the expression "*buzzing shade*." A single word here conveys to the mind all the imagery of a passage in the same author which Mr. Warton justly commends as equally new and picturesque.

Refounds the living surface of the ground :  
 Nor undelightful is the ceaseless hum

To

## NATURAL HISTORY. 73

To him that muses through the woods at noon ;  
Or drowsy shepherd, as he lies reclin'd  
With half-shut eyes.

It is by means of such bold comprehensive touches as these, that Poetry is frequently enabled to produce more lively representations than Painting, even of sensible objects.

THE instances hitherto quoted all refer to the application of images drawn from natural history to the purposes of *simple description*. They are, however, capable of being used to advantage in the several *figures of comparison*; and thereby admit of application in various kinds of poetical compositions, where they could not have place as primary objects.

THE

## 74 POETICAL USE OF

THE distinguished rank which *similes* bear among the decorations of epic poetry has been remarked by all critics, ancient and modern. Indeed, as the writings of Homer were the foundation of every idea concerning the *Epopæa*, it was impossible that an object so striking in them should have escaped notice. Homer, in reality, as Mr. Pope observes, “ excels all mankind in the number, variety, and beauty of his comparisons.” He perhaps may in various instances manage and apply them without exact propriety; but he almost always offers something beautiful or sublime to the imagination of his reader; and what is particularly to our present purpose, his *similes* are a most valuable store of accurate descriptions of nature. That  
minute-

## NATURAL HISTORY. 75

minuteness of detail, running out into circumstances foreign to the point of similitude, which has been censured, perhaps justly, as an imperfection in them, considered as figures of comparison, renders them peculiarly excellent as pieces of natural history. They are neither confined to the single object which corresponds to the thing compared, nor do they turn solely upon those obvious and well known properties of the subject which might be learned from a cursory survey, or the information of common language; but they every-where evince the man who had sedulously, with his own eyes, examined the face of nature, and whose rapid flow of conception would not suffer him to suppress any circumstances which could add beauty or animation

## 76 POETICAL USE OF

animation to his pictures. Considered, therefore, as descriptive sketches rather than similes, they are truly admirable, and deserve to be accurately studied. I shall select a few of the most striking, which, besides the pleasure they may afford in the perusal, may give occasion to some remarks not unimportant to our purpose.

THE Grecian army pouring over the plain of Scamander, is compared to a flock of water-fowl, in a few lines finely descriptive of the manners of that class of birds.

——— ὡς ορνιθῶν πετεηνῶν ἐθνεα πολλὰ,  
 Χηνῶν, ἢ γερανῶν, ἢ κυκνῶν δαλιχοδεϊρῶν,  
 Ἀσιῶ ἐν λειμῶνι, Καυτρικ αμφοῖ ρεεθρα,  
 Ἐνθα καὶ ἐνθα ποτῶνται ἀγαλλομεναι πτερυγεσσι,  
 Κλαγγηδὸν προκαδίζοντων, σμαραγεὶ δὲ τε λειμῶν.

IL. II. 459.

Not

## NATURAL HISTORY. 77

Not less their number than th' embody'd cranes,  
Or milk-white swans in Afus' watry plains,  
That o'er the windings of Cayster's springs,  
Stretch their long necks, and clap their rustling  
wings,  
Now tow'r aloft, and course in airy rounds ;  
Now light with noise ; with noise the field  
resounds.

POPE.

THE expression in the fourth line of the original is peculiarly excellent, both with regard to sense and sound ; and is but inadequately rendered in the translation.

THE works of Homer afford no proper description of the war-horse ; for the use of cavalry being unknown at the siege of Troy, the warlike properties of that creature were not displayed to advantage in its less honourable station of  
being



78 POETICAL USE OF

being harnessed to a chariot. Beauty and swiftness are the distinguishing qualities of his most celebrated courfers ; many of which would probably have made no ignoble figure at Newmarket. Under this character, the following picture of a high-bred stallion galloping to pasture, as resembled to Paris issuing gallantly armed to the field, is perhaps the most exquisitely beautiful that a poet ever drew :

Ὡς δ' ὅτε τις γατος ἵππος, ἀνοήσας ἐπὶ φάτῃ,  
 Δεσμον ἀπορρήξας θείει πεδίοιο κροαινῶν,  
 Εἰώδως λασθᾷ ευρρείος πόλαμοιο,  
 Κυδιῶν ὕψε δὲ κάρη εἰχει, ἀμφὶ δὲ χαιταὶ  
 ὦμοις αἰσσοῦνται· ὃ δ' ἀγλαίῃ πεποιδὼς,  
 Ριμφὰ ἱ γυνὰ φέρει μετὰ τ' ἠδεὰ καὶ νομόν ἵππων.

IL. VI. 506.

The wanton courser thus, with reins unbound,  
 Breaks from his stall, and beats the trembling  
 ground ;

Pamper'd

Pamper'd and proud, he seeks the wonted tides,  
 And laves, in height of blood, his shining sides ;  
 His head now freed he tosses to the skies ;  
 His mane dishevel'd o'er his shoulders flies ;  
 He snuffs the females in the distant plain,  
 And springs, exulting, to his fields again.

Pope.

No animal has supplied Homer with so much matter for comparison as the lion. The superior strength and courage of this royal beast have acquired him the honour of being successively the type of every favourite hero in the Iliad.\* His appearance is, indeed, too little varied in several instances ; yet the

\* IT is remarkable, that although the Lion was never an inhabitant of Europe, or, at least, only of a very small part of it, the admiration of his generous qualities has given him as superior a share in the armorial ensigns of every European nation, as he possesses in Homer's similes. May not the works of this poet have been the chief means of introducing him to such general favour ?

whole

## 86 POETICAL USE OF

whole forms no inconsiderable portion of his natural history. The passage of all others which contains the greatest number of particulars concerning him, represented in the noblest style of painting, is that in which he is likened to Achilles about to engage with Æneas.

---

λεων ὡς

Σιῆης, ὃν τε καὶ ἀνδρὲς ἀποκταμένοι μεμκάσιιν,  
 Ἀγρομενοι, πᾶς δῆμος· ὃ δὲ, πρῶτον μὲν αἰτίζων,  
 Ἐρχέσθαι, ἀλλ' ὅτε κεν τις ἀρηίδων αἰζηῶν  
 Δερί βαλὴ, ἔαλῃ τε χανῶν, περὶ τ' ἀφρὸς οδοῖας  
 Γυγνέσθαι, ἐν δὲ τε οἱ κραδίη γενεὶ αλκιμον ἦτορ,  
 Οὐρὴ δὲ πλευρὰς τε καὶ ἰσχίᾳ ἀμφοτέρωθεν  
 Μαστέσθαι, ἔε δ' αὐτὸν ἐποτρυνεὶ μαχεσασθᾶι·  
 Γλαυκιῶν δ' ἰθὺς φερέσθαι μένει· ἠλῖνα πεφνη  
 Ἀνδρῶν, ἢ αὐτὸς φθίεσθαι πρῶτῳ ἐν ὁμίλῳ·

IL. XX. 164.

---

Such the lion's rage  
 Who viewing first his foes with scornful eyes,  
 Tho'

## NATURAL HISTORY. 81

Tho' all in arms the peopled city rise,  
Stalks careless on, with unregarding pride ;  
Till at the length, by some brave youth defy'd,  
To his bold spear the savage turns alone,  
He murmurs fury with a hollow groan ;  
He grins, he foams, he rolls his eyes around ;  
Lash'd by his tail his heaving sides resound ;  
He calls up all his rage ; he grinds his teeth,  
Resolv'd on vengeance, or resolv'd on death.

POPE.

IN Pliny's account of the lion there are several circumstances so perfectly agreeing with this description, that one cannot but suspect the Naturalist to have copied from the poet. "*Spernens tela*  
"*diu se terrore solo tuetur, ac velut*  
"*cogi testatur : cooriturque non tan-*  
"*quam periculo coactus, sed tanquam*  
"*amentię iratus.*" " Scorning the hunter's darts, he long defends himself by the terror alone which he inspires,

G and

## 82 POETICAL USE OF

and as it were testifies that he is forced to engage ; and he at length rouses, not as if compelled by danger, but maddened by fury." "Vulneratus observatione mira percussorem novit, et in quantalibet multitudine adpetit." "When wounded he marks his assailant with wonderful attention, and singles him out in the midst of the greatest throng." A circumstance not mentioned by Homer, which adds much to the heroical character of this animal, is related by Pliny. This is, that, upon open ground, and in full view, though urged by the warmest onset of dogs and men, he retreats slowly, and in a fighting posture ; but when his disgrace is concealed among woods and thickets, he flies with the utmost precipitation.

THE

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## NATURAL HISTORY. 83

THE wild-boar is another warlike savage which serves as a frequent object of comparison with the ferocious heroes of the Iliad. Idomeneus waiting the attack of Æneas gives occasion to a spirited description of this animal in the following simile.

————— ὡς ὅτε τις σὺς ἔρῃσιν ἀλλυ πεποιθώς,  
 'Ὅς τε μένει κολοσσύριον ἐπερχόμενον πολλὴν ἀνδρῶν  
 Χωρῶ ἐν οἰοπόλῳ, φρίσσει δὲ τε νῶτον ὑπερθεῖν·  
 Ὀφθαλμῷ δ' ἀρα οἱ πυρὶ λαμπέτον' αὐτὰρ ὀδυνίαις  
 Θηγεῖ, ἀλεξάσθαι μεμῶως κύναις, ἤδε καὶ ἀνδράσιν.

IL. XIII. 471.

As the fell boar on some rough mountain's head,  
 Arm'd with wild terrors, and to slaughter bred,  
 When the loud rusticks rise, and shout from far,  
 Attends the tumult, and expects the war;  
 O'er his bent back the bristly horrors rise,  
 Fire streams in lightning from his sanguine eyes,

## 84 POETICAL USE OF

His foaming tusks both dogs and men engage,  
But most his hunters rouse his mighty rage.

POPE.

JUSTICE to Homer obliges me to remark several imperfections in Mr. Pope's translation of this passage, which injure both its spirit and correctness. The second line is not only entirely expletive, but contains an inaccurate idea. "To slaughter bred" can only be applied with propriety to an animal of prey; whereas the boar never attacks other creatures but in defence of itself or its young. The fourth line is enfeebled by an unmeaning pleonasm. In the seventh, the whole application of the simile and sense of the author is perverted, by representing the animal as already engaged with its foes, instead of remaining in a posture to receive their

## NATURAL HISTORY. 85

their attack. The last line is quite unwarranted by the original; and although the translation is thus protracted to an unusual length, a circumstance of importance in the description, that of the boar's whetting his tusks, is omitted.

A SIMILE which has, perhaps, more of the *terrible* than any other in Homer, yet is truly beautiful as a painting in natural history, is that wherein the Myrmidons, eager for combat, are compared to a troop of wolves burning with thirst after devouring their prey.

---

λυκοι ὥς

Ὠμοφαγοι, τοῖσιν τε περὶ φρεσὶν ἀσπετος ἀλκή,  
 Οἷτ' ἐλαφον κέραον μέλαν ὕρσει δῆωσαντες  
 Δαπνίσιν· πασὶν δὲ παρῆιον αἵματι φοῖνον,



Και τ' ἀγέληδον ιασιν ἀπο κρήνης μελανύδρου,  
 Λαβρόντες γλωσσησιν αραιήσιν μελαν ὕδωρ  
 Ἀκρον, ἐρευγομενοι φονον αἱμαῖος· ἐν δὲ γε θυμός  
 Στήθεσιν ἀτρομός ἐστι, περιστενέλαι δὲ τε γαστήρ.

IL. XVI. 156,

Grim as voracious wolves that seek the springs  
 When scalding thirst their burning bowels wrings.  
 (When some tall stag, fresh-slaughter'd in the wood,  
 Has drench'd their wide insatiate throats with blood)  
 To the black fount they rush, a hideous throng,  
 With paunch distended, and with lolling tongue,  
 Fire fills their eye, their black jaws belch the gore,  
 And gorg'd with slaughter, still they thirst for more.

POPE.

In this, also, the translator has shewn a want of attention to the correctness of delineation in his original, by entirely omitting a part of the description very characteristic of the *genus* to which the animal belongs. This is the manner of  
 their

## NATURAL HISTORY. 87

their drinking, and form of their tongues, which Homer minutely describes by the words,

Λαφόντες γλωσσησιν αραιησιν μελαν υδαρ  
Ακρον.

“ Lapping the surface of the water with their slender tongues.”

SUCH is the variety of nature, that original painters, even of the same subject, need not be apprehensive of falling into an uninteresting sameness. One of the most striking and animated pieces in all Thomson's *Seasons*, is the description of wolves descending from the mountains in the depth of winter; and notwithstanding the minute accuracy of Homer's representation, the reader will find in no part of Thomson's the insipid air of a copy.

## 88 POETICAL USE OF

By wintry famine rous'd, from all the tract  
 Of horrid mountains which the shining Alps,  
 And wavy Appenine, and Pyrenees,  
 Branch out stupendous into distant lands ;  
 Cruel as death, and hungry as the grave !  
 Burning for blood ! bony, and ghaunt, and grim !  
 Assembling wolves in raging troops descend ;  
 And, pouring o'er the country, bear along,  
 Keen as the north-wind sweeps the glossy snow.  
 All is their prize. They fasten on the steed,  
 Press him to earth, and pierce his mighty heart,  
 Nor can the bull his awful front defend,  
 Or shake the murdering savages away.  
 Rapacious, at the mother's throat they fly,  
 And tear the screaming infant from her breast.  
 The godlike face of Man avails him nought.  
 Even beauty, force divine ! at whose bright glance  
 The generous lion stands in softened gaze,  
 Here bleeds, a hapless undistinguish'd prey.  
 But if, appriz'd of the severe attack,  
 The country be shut up, lur'd by the scent,  
 On church-yards drear (inhuman to relate !)  
 The disappointed prowlers fall, and dig

The

## NATURAL HISTORY. 89

The shrouded body from the grave ; o'er which,  
Mix'd with foul shades, and frighted ghosts, they  
howl.

THE liberties Mr. Pope has every where taken in his translation of Homer were, perhaps, in great measure necessary in order to sustain the dignity essential to modern heroic poetry. But when subjects of natural history come before him, he sometimes appears not only too nice and fastidious in his exceptions, but deficient in the knowledge requisite to make judicious alterations. The comparison of Menelaus, not to be repulsed from the dead body of Patroclus, to a teizing fly, \* may, perhaps, justly be regarded as inconsistent with the majesty of epic poetry ; but it is little

\* IL, XVII. 579.

improved

90 POETICAL USE OF

improved in the translation by the substitution of a hornet, at the expence of whatever was natural in the resemblance. The following simile has undergone as bold an alteration from the translator, without any apparent necessity. The Greeks flying before Hector and Æneas, are thus compared by Homer.

Των δ' ὥς τε ψαρων νεφος ἐρχέσθαι, ἢ κολοίω

Ουλον κεκληγόντες, ὅτε προιδῶσιν ἰοῖλα

Κίρκον, ὃ, τε Σμικρῆσι φόνον φέρει ὀρνίθεσσιν·

IL. XVII. 755.

LITERALLY thus: "As a cloud of stares or daws fly dismally shrieking, when they descry the approach of the *Circus*,\* which brings slaughter to small birds."

\* IN the *Odyssæy* this bird is called ἰρήξ κίρκος, ελαφροτάτος πτετηγών: "the hawk *Circus*, the swiftest of birds." L. 1 B. XIII. V. 86.

MR.

## NATURAL HISTORY. 91

MR. POPE choofes to render the paffage as follows.

Wedge'd in one body, like a flight of cranes,  
That shriek incessant while the falcon hung  
High on pois'd pinions, threats their callow  
young.

POPE.

By substituting one of the largest species of fowl to the small birds of the original, he, doubtless, thought to give elevation to the comparifon; but he has thereby drawn a picture which has, I believe, nothing of reality, in place of one extremely natural and familiar to a common obferver.

I SHALL borrow one more fimile from Homer, in which a fubject of the vegetable kingdom is elegantly characterifed

## 92 POETICAL USE OF

terised and pleasingly applied. It is the beautiful comparison of the young Simoisius slain to a fallen poplar.

αἰγυῖρος ὥς  
 Ἦ ρα τ' ἐν εἰαμένη ἔλεος μεγαλοῖο πεφυκεῖ,  
 Λεῖη αἶψα τε οἱ οὔτοι ἐπ' ἀκροτάτῃ πεφύασι·  
 Τὴν μὲν δ' ἄρματοπῆγος ἀνὴρ αἰθῶνι σιδήρῳ  
 Ἐξέταμ', ὅφρα ἵτυν καμψὴ περικαλλεῖ διφρῶ,  
 Ἦ μὲν τ' ἀζόμενῃ κείται πόλαμοιο παρ' οὐχθας.

IL. IV. 482.

So falls a poplar, that in watry ground  
 Rais'd high the head, with stately branches  
 crown'd,

(Fell'd by some artist with his shining steel,  
 To shape the circle of the bending wheel)  
 Cut down it lies, tall, smooth, and largely  
 spread,

With all its beauteous honours on its head ;  
 There left a subject to the wind and rain,  
 And scorch'd by suns, it withers on the plain.

POPE.

As

## NATURAL HISTORY. 93

As a contrast to this pathetic image of prostrate youth and beauty, I shall present the reader with a noble similitude, drawn from the same source, of manly strength and dignity suffering under the decays of age. It is taken from an elegant moral fable in Spenser's *Shepherd's Calendar*.

There grew an aged Tree on the greene,  
A goodly Oake sometime it had beene,  
With armes full strong and largely displaide,  
But of their leaves they were disaraide :  
The bodie bigge, and mightily pight, \*  
Thoroughly rooted, and of wondrous hight :  
Whilome had beene the king of the field,  
And mochel mast to the husband did yeeld,  
And with his nuts larded many swine ;  
But now the gray mosse marred his rine,  
His bared boughes were beaten with stormes,

\* Pitched, fixed.



## 94 POETICAL USE OF

His top was bald, and waited with wormes,  
His honour decayed, his branches fere.

FEBRUARY.

THIS description is so lively, that a *visible* representation of the object can scarcely be desired: if it were, I would refer to the splendid edition of Evelyn's *Sylva*, lately published by Dr. Hunter of York, in which, the view of the *Cawthorpe Oak* is as perfect a delineation of the poet's idea, as if it had been drawn for the purpose.

It has been remarked that Homer's comparisons, though excellent as paintings from nature, are often but imperfectly adapted to the circumstance which gives occasion to them. Later writers have seldom been faulty in this respect;

respect; but, on the other hand, they have generally been too sparing of such particulars as might afford characteristical descriptions of the resembling objects. It is in great measure owing to this defect, that they so much fail in that variety, novelty, and distinctness of imagery which constitute the true riches of poetry. A simile may perfectly answer the end of *explanation*, without offering any thing new or engaging to the mind. Such an one might be excellent for the purpose of instruction, but comes far short of poetical merit.

THE following simile from Milton may be instanced as an example of equal perfection both in the description and the application. The Devil viewing  
 ing

96 POETICAL USE OF

ing Adam and Eve in Paradise is thus resembled.

———— as a tiger, who by chance hath spy'd  
In some purlieu two gentle fawns at play,  
Strait couches close, then rising changes oft  
His couchant watch, as one who chose his ground,  
Whence rushing he might surest seize them both  
Grip'd in each paw.

PAR. LOST.

Not inferior in correctness, though  
less elevated in its subject, is that beautiful one of Gay in his ballad of *William and Susan*.

So the ~~sweet~~ lark, high pois'd in air,  
Shuts close his pinions to his breast  
If chance his mate's shrill call he hear,  
And drops at once into her nest.

I HOPE I shall not be thought influenced

## NATURAL HISTORY. 97

enced by fraternal partiality in adding, from Mrs. Barbauld's Poems, a simile, the converse of those before quoted, in which a subject of natural history is adorned by a comparison equally striking from its novelty, and happy in its application. The writer is describing the transformation of the caterpillar from its *chrysalis* to its butterfly state.

So when Rinaldo struck the conscious rind  
He found a nymph in every trunk confin'd ;  
The forest labours with convulsive throes,  
The bursting trees the lovely births disclose,  
And a gay troop of damsels round him stood,  
Where late was rugged bark and lifeless wood.

*To Mrs. P----. with Drawings.*

To illustrate and enforce *moral precepts* by allusions to the manners of animals in the way of fable was an inven-

H

tion

tion of the earlieſt antiquity. No compositions have been ſo univerſally popular as thoſe of the fabuliſts of different nations; and notwithstanding all the viciffitudes of taſte and ſyſtem, we ſtill read with delight their inſtructive leſſons, becauſe they are inculcated by examples as familiar to the mind at the preſent day, as they were two or three thouſand years ago. In proportion, however, as the familiarity of theſe inſtances is requiſite to their effect in a fable, it is evident that no minute or uncommon relations in natural hiſtory can with propriety be introduced into theſe compositions. Some general caſt of character, ſome obvious and well-known properties, in the animals which form the *dramatis perſonæ* of fable, muſt be the ground-work of every alluſive tale. The generous courage of the

Lion

## NATURAL HISTORY. 99

Lion, the cruelty of the Tiger, the cunning of the Fox, the fidelity of the Dog, the stupidity of the Afs, and the like, are permanent and distinguishing attributes, from the operation of which, in various situations, the incidents proper for fabulous story arise. Fable considers every animal as a human creature; and therefore has to do only with such of its qualities as bear a resemblance to the affections and manners of mankind, not with such as peculiarly constitute its natural history. It is indeed highly requisite that as much of the latter as is necessary in tracing out the subject and scenery of a fable should be represented with truth and accuracy; and the many errors of this kind which have been admitted into collections of fables are to be lamented as a source of false opinions,

100 POETICAL USE OF

which, from their early possession of the mind, are frequently never to be eradicated.

ALTHOUGH the walk of fable is thus unfit for the display of that novelty which natural history affords, there are methods in which more circumstantial and appropriated descriptions of nature might be made very happily to accord with the conveyance of moral instruction. A most pleasing example of this kind, which has all the merit of originality as well as beauty, is exhibited in a poem of Mr. Jago's, (*Dodley's Coll. vol. V.*) entitled *the Swallows*. The ingenious and benevolent writer, who in his *Elegies of the Goldfinches* and *Blackbirds* has pathetically pleaded the rights of humanity with respect to  
the

## NATURAL HISTORY. 101

the feathered race, in this piece, from that providential instinct which incites the swallow tribe to launch fearless on the unbounded sky in quest of a retreat from the storms of winter, deduces with persuasive energy the reasonableness of a confidential reliance on the same providence, in our flight from the stormy regions of this life to a peaceful futurity.

And does no power its friendly aid dispense,  
Nor give *us* tidings of some happier clime ?  
Find *we* no guide in gracious Providence  
Beyond the stroke of death, the verge of time!

A fine vein of descriptive poetry is intermixed with the moral sentiment of this little piece, so that he has shewn himself an elegant observer of nature, as well as a forcible preacher.



102 POETICAL USE OF

The return of the swallows, in particular, is beautifully painted.

At length the winter's furly blasts are o'er;  
Array'd in smiles the lovely spring returns:  
Health to the breeze unbars the screaming door,  
And every breast with heat celestial burns.

Again the daisies peep, the violets blow,  
Again the tenants of the leafy grove,  
Forgot the patt'ring hail, the driving snow,  
Resume the lay to melody and love.

And see, my Delia, see o'er yonder stream,  
Where on the sunny bank the lambkins play,  
Alike attracted to th' enlivening gleam,  
The stranger swallows take their wonted way.

NOTHING can be better imagined,  
or more consonant to the natural history  
of these birds, than their supposed  
conversation on their return.

I'll think I hear you tell of distant lands,  
What insect nations rise from Egypt's mud,  
What

## NATURAL HISTORY. 103

What painted swarms subsist on Lybia's sands,  
What mild Euphrates yields, and Ganges'  
flood.

I cannot but attribute a degree of merit to this poem, higher than its mere poetical excellence might claim, on account of its being the model of a new combination of moral precept with natural description, greatly superior, in many respects, to fable. To encourage the imitation of this, as well as the other beauties which have been exemplified in the preceding pages, by shewing that their source is still open and unexhausted, will more particularly be the business of the remaining part of this Essay.

PLINY has already been mentioned as a naturalist who throws into his

H 4                      descrip-

## 104 POETICAL USE OF

descriptions all the fire and elevation of a poet. He may therefore be advantageously studied not only for the matter of his relations, but the style in which they are cloathed; for as the former is often extremely curious and entertaining, and indeed of better authority than is commonly imagined, so the latter is remarkably bold, expressive, and energetic.\* It would be difficult for a writer in poetry to improve the following description, in which the Dog is represented with a

\* A RELISH for the beauties of this author, and an esteem for the study of natural history, induced the writer of this Essay lately to publish some select pieces, chiefly extracted from the zoological parts of his work, which, while they were principally designed for the use of schools, might at the same time be not unacceptable to such classical readers as should wish to obtain a general knowledge of this author's manner and language, without the labour of turning over his voluminous writings.

charac-

NATURAL HISTORY. 105

character of courage and magnanimity equal to that of Homer's lions, and as fuitable for heroical comparison.

“ Indiam petenti Alexandro Magno,  
“ rex Albanix dono dederat inusitatae  
“ magnitudinis unum: cujus specie de-  
“ lectatus jussit urfos, mox apros, et de-  
“ inde damas emitti, contemptu immo-  
“ bili jacente eo. Qua segnitie tanti cor-  
“ poris offensu Imperator generosi spiri-  
“ tus, eum interimi jussit. Nuntiavit hoc  
“ fama regi. Itaque alterum mittens ad-  
“ didit mandata, ne in parvis experiri  
“ vellet, sed in leone, elephantove. Duos  
“ sibi fuisse: hoc interemto, praeterea  
“ nullum fore. Nec distulit Alexander,  
“ leonemque fractum protinus vidit.  
“ Postea elephantum jussit induci, haud  
“ alio

" alio magis spectaculo lætatus. Hor-  
 " rentibus quippe per totum corpus vil-  
 " lis, ingenti primum latratu intonuit :  
 " moxque increvit adfultans, contraque  
 " belluam exfurgens hinc et illinc, arti-  
 " fici dimicatione, qua maxime opus  
 " effet, infestans atque evitans, donec  
 " assidua rotatam vertigine adflixit, ad  
 " casum ejus tellure concussa."

" ALEXANDER the Great on his expedi-  
 tion to India received from the king of  
 Albania a present of a dog of uncommon  
 bigness. Struck with its appearance, he  
 commanded bears, wild boars, and stags  
 to be turned out successively before it;  
 but the animal lay still in quiet con-  
 tempt. The generous prince, offended  
 at such want of spirit in so vast a bulk,  
 ordered the dog to be killed. The Alba-  
 nian king, hearing of this, sent another,  
 the

## NATURAL HISTORY. 107

the only one of the kind remaining, with a request that they would try him, not with inferior kinds of game, but with a lion or an elephant. Alexander complied, and beheld a lion instantly torn to pieces. Greatly delighted with the spectacle, he then commanded an elephant to be brought out before him. The dog, bristling up the hairs of his whole body, first thundered with a terrible barking; then flew at the elephant, and rising to him on this and that side, artfully attacking and yielding by turns, made him so giddy with the incessant rotation, that at length he fell, the earth shaking at his fall."

THE manner in which the sea-eagle strikes its prey is described with similar force and elegance, and forms an image well adapted to poetical representation.

After

## 108 POETICAL USE OF

After speaking of the other species of eagles, he says, "Supereft haliaetos, "clariffima oculorum acie, librans ex "alto fefe ; vifoque in mari pifce, præ- "ceps in eum ruens, & difcuffis pectore "aquis rapiens." "The fea-eagle remains, endowed with a moft piercing fight : he balances himfelf on high, and efpying a fifh in the fea, descends precipitately upon it, and feizes it, dafhing afunder the waves with his breaft." The ftriking appearance of this rapid defcent has not efaped the notice of other naturalifts. The ofprey, a bird of the aquiline clafs, which takes its prey in this manner, has the exprefive name of *leaden eagle*, "Auguifta piumbina," given it by the Italians ; and on the fame account the term *Cataracta*.

## NATURAL HISTORY. 109

*rasta* is applied to a particular species of gull.

VARIOUS comparisons have been framed by the poets to represent in a forcible and lively manner the situation of a person enjoying himself in security, thoughtless of some impending danger. Gray, in his poem of *the Bard*, has in a very sublime and beautiful manner wrought up a common image to this purpose.

Fair laughs the morn, and soft the Zephyr blows,  
While proudly riding o'er the azure realm  
In gallant trim the gilded Vessel goes ;  
Youth on the prow, and Pleasure at the helm ;  
Regardless of the sweeping Whirlwind's sway,  
That hush'd in grim repose, expects his evening  
prey.

AN



AN image exactly correspondent to this, and although less sublime, equally expressive and picturesque, might be copied from Pliny's account of the pigeon. This bird, he says, appears to have a sense of pride, exhibited not only in the ostentatious display of its colours, but in a wanton manner of figuring in its flight, and clapping its wings, which occasions it sometimes to entangle its feathers, and offer itself an easy prey to its deadly foe, the hawk. "Spectat occultus  
 "fronde latro, et gaudentem in ipsa  
 "gloria rapit." "The felon marks him, concealed among the leaves, and snatches him away in the midst of his glory."

HIS description of the birds called *apodes*, which Mr. Pennant supposes to be the *stormy petrel*, is very lively, and  
 would

## NATURAL HISTORY. 111

would make a pleasing figure in a sea-piece. "Hæ sunt, quæ toto mari cernuntur : nec umquam tam longo navibus, tamque continuo cursu recedunt a terra, ut non circumvolitent eas apodes. Cetera genera residunt et insistant : his quies, nisi in nido, nulla : aut pendent, aut jacent." "These are the birds which are every-where seen at sea, nor are ships ever so far or so long distant from land, but the Apodes fly round them. Others of the feathered kind rest at times by standing or sitting: these have no repose but in their nests. ---they are always either suspended or recumbent."

OBJECTS little and inconsiderable when taken singly, may acquire importance, and suggest ideas of grandeur and  
subli-

sublimity, when presented in collected numbers. A single grain of sand is a thing too minute for any purpose of description or comparison, but "the sands of the sea shore" form an image of multitude sufficiently grand and elevated for the highest species of composition. This remark will apply to several of the smaller subjects of the animal creation ; which, though individually unfit for poetical imagery, are rendered peculiarly striking objects from their immense numbers. The dire armies of locusts which overspread many of the southern countries at certain seasons, are magnificently described in several parts of Scripture. They are said to "darken the sun," to bring "a day of clouds and thick darkness," to be "a nation strong and without number, like a strong people

## NATURAL HISTORY. 113

ple set in battle array ;” whose noise is like that “ of chariots on the tops of the mountains,---of a flame of fire that devoureth the stubble ;” before whom “ the land is as the garden of Eden,” but “ behind them a desolate wilderness.”\* Dr. Shaw, by whose excellent zoological remarks in his *Travels* so many passages in the Sacred Writings have been elucidated, has shewn, from the testimony of his own observation, that these poetical expressions are scarcely hyperbolical with respect to this formidable insect. And our elegant Roman naturalist gives a description of its migratory swarms, which, while it is more particular, is almost equally sublime with that of the eastern poet.

\* Joel, ch. I. and II.

## 114 POETICAL USE OF

"DEORUM iræ pestis ea intelligitur.  
 "Namque et grandiores cernuntur, et  
 "tanto volant pennarum stridore, ut  
 "aliæ alites credantur: Solemque obum-  
 "brant, sollicitis suspectantibus popu-  
 "lis, ne suas operiant terras. Suffici-  
 "unt quippe vires: et tamquam parum  
 "sit maria transisse, immensos tractus  
 "permeant, diraque messibus conte-  
 "gunt nube, multa contactu aduren-  
 "tes: omnia vero morfu erodentes,  
 "et fores quoque tectorum."

"THIS plague is considered as a ma-  
 nifestation of the wrath of the Gods.  
 For they appear of an unusual size; and  
 fly with such a noise from the motion  
 of their wings, that they might be  
 taken for birds. They darken the sun;  
 and the nations view them in anxious  
 suspense,

## NATURAL HISTORY. 115

suspense, each apprehensive lest their own lands should be overspread by them. For their strength is unfailing; and as if it were a small thing to have crossed oceans, they pervade immense tracts of land, and cover the harvests with a dreadful cloud; their very touch destroying many of the fruits of the earth, but their bite utterly consuming all its products, and even the doors of houses." \*

VARIOUS other images of multitude, equally striking, might be derived from observations in natural history. What, for instance, can offer so lively a com-

\* As extraordinary as this circumstance may appear, Mr. Adanson mentions a very similar one to which he was witness — A swarm of locusts at Senegal devoured even the dry reeds with which the huts were thatched.

parison of the vast *human* swarms which at different periods have migrated from the *northern hive*, as the descent of the *Lemings* from the mountains of the same region; whose immense numbers, wonderful order and unconquerable pertinacity, render their incursions formidable, even to human strength and contrivance? In the following curious relation, one of the minutest tribe of insects appears with an air of grandeur and importance from being collected in numbers beyond the power of computation.

“DURING my stay,” says Smith,  
 “at Cape Coast Castle, a body of  
 “these ants came to pay us a visit  
 “in our fortification. It was about  
 “day-break when the advanced guard  
 “of this famished crew entered the  
 “chapel,

## NATURAL HISTORY. 117

“ chapel, where some negro servants  
“ were asleep upon the floor. The  
“ men were quickly alarmed at the  
“ invasion of this unexpected army,  
“ and prepared, as well as they could,  
“ for a defence. While the foremost  
“ battalion of insects had already ta-  
“ ken possession of the place, the  
“ rear-guard was more than a quar-  
“ ter of a mile distant. The whole  
“ ground seemed alive, and crawling  
“ with unceasing destruction. After  
“ deliberating a few moments upon  
“ what was to be done, it was resol-  
“ ved to lay a large train of gunpow-  
“ der along the path they had taken;  
“ by this means millions were blown  
“ to pieces; and the rear-guard per-  
“ ceiving the destruction of their lea-  
“ ders, thought proper instantly to  
I 3 “ return,



118 POETICAL USE OF

“return, and make back to their original habitation.”

BUT almost every idea of multitude is surpassed by that of the herring shoals, which annually leave their great winter rendezvous in the arctic circle, and move in a mighty army towards the south. Mr. Pennant's description of this remarkable phenomenon is equally elegant and lively.

“THEY begin to appear off the  
“Shetland Isles in April and May;  
“these are only forerunners of the  
“grand shoal which comes in June,  
“and their appearance is marked by  
“certain signs by the numbers of  
“birds, such as gannets, and others  
“which follow to prey on them: but  
when

## NATURAL HISTORY. 119.

“when the main body approaches,  
“its breadth and its depth is such  
“as to alter the appearance of the  
“very ocean. It is divided into dis-  
“tinct columns of five or six miles  
“in length, and three or four in  
“breadth, and they drive the wa-  
“ter before them with a kind of rip-  
“pling: sometimes they sink for the  
“space of ten or fifteen minutes, then  
“rise again to the surface, and in  
“bright weather reflect a variety of  
“splendid colors, like a field of the  
“most precious gems.

THE shoals that liberally offer them-  
selves for the food and maintenance of  
so large a share of the human species,  
at our most celebrated fisheries, are  
only small detachments from this innu-

merable host.——But to return to beauties of a more varied and characteristic kind.

WERE a second Thomson to arise among us, he might derive several pleasing additions to the rural scenery and poetical calendar of this country from the work already so often referred to, Mr. Pennant's *British Zoology*. Some of the circumstances which I shall select from it, are so exactly suited to the manner of that admirable poet, that we may be assured he would have made use of them, had they occurred to his mind.

AMONG the signs which announce the very earliest approach of spring, he would have dwelt with delight upon the interesting and picturesque figure  
of

## NATURAL HISTORY. 121

of the Mistle-thrush, the largest of our songsters ; concerning which Mr. Pennant acquaints us, that “ it begins its “ song, which is very fine, sitting on “ the summit of a high tree, very early “ in the spring, often with the new “ year, in blowing showery weather ; “ whence the inhabitants of Hampshire “ call it the *Storm-cock*. ”

WE have seen how exquisitely Thomson has painted a hot summer's noon, by a group of animals oppressed with languor under the beams of a meridian sun. Were the instant of time changed, and the effects of a less overpowering heat to be represented, a distinguished place in the landscape might be allotted to the fox, which “ in warm weather “ will quit its habitation for the sake of basking

“basking in the sun, or to enjoy the  
 “fresh air; but then it rarely lies ex-  
 “posed, but chuses some thick brake,  
 “and generally of gorse, that it may  
 “rest secure from surprise. Crows,  
 “magpies, and other birds, who con-  
 “sider the fox as their common enemy,  
 “will often, by their notes of anger,  
 “point out its retreat.”

It is somewhat extraordinary that  
 the very curious œconomy of the de-  
 coys for wild ducks should have escaped  
 Thomson's notice. The marshy wood-  
 ed solitudes in which they are placed;  
 the art with which they are constructed;  
 the wonderful instinct which renders  
 these creatures capable of being taught  
 to be the crafty betrayers of their com-  
 panions; the surprise and struggle of  
 the

## NATURAL HISTORY. 123

the strangers on finding themselves unexpectedly entrapped, would all together afford copious matter as well for sentiment as description. A circumstance relating to them, mentioned by Mr. Pennant, would be a pleasing, and entirely new object in an evening picture. "As soon as the evening sets in, the decoy *rises* (as they term it) and the wild fowl feed during night. If the evening is still, the noise of their wings, during their flight, is heard at a great distance, and is a pleasing, though rather melancholy sound."

THE agreeable use Mr. Jago has made of the migration of swallows, was just now remarked. The moral plan of his poem rendered it less proper

per to enter minutely into the natural part of the phenomenon ; but a descriptive poet might greatly improve the picture from Mr. Pennant's article on that subject. With what pleasing and picturesque circumstances are the departure and return of the swallows represented in the two following relations? " Mr. White (a clergyman of Selborne, Hants) on Michaelmas 1768, had the good fortune to have ocular proof of what may reasonably be supposed an actual migration of swallows. Travelling that morning very early between his house and the coast, at the beginning of his journey he was environed with a thick fog ; but on a large wild heath the mist began to break, and discovered to him numberless swallows, clustered

## NATURAL HISTORY. 125

“tered on the standing bushes, as if  
“they had roosted there : as soon as the  
“sun burst out, they were instantly on  
“wing, and with an easy and placid  
“flight, proceeded towards the sea.”

“RETURNING home” says Sir Charles  
Wager, “in the spring of the year, as  
“I came into sounding in our channel,  
“a great flock of swallows came and  
“settled on all my rigging ; every rope  
“was covered ; they hung on one ano-  
“ther like a swarm of bees ; the decks  
“and carving were filled with them.  
“They seemed almost famished and  
“spent, and were only feathers and  
“bones ; but being recruited with a  
“night’s rest, took their flight in the  
“morning.”

THE



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THE migration of birds in general, is indeed a fertile source of those uncommon and even sublime ideas which are essential to poetry. What more admirable than that secret impulse which incites every individual of a whole species to cross immense seas and tracts of land in search of a secure retreat against unknown impending evils! What more beautiful than the order of their assembling and flight! What more astonishing than their prodigious numbers when congregated for this purpose! "I have seen," says Linnæus "the surface of the Calix, (a river in Lapland,) "for the space of eight days and nights, "entirely covered with ducks, passing "towards the sea on their southern "journey, exceeding in number the "armies of Xerxes, so that I could not  
" have

---

NATURAL HISTORY. 127

“ have imagined that such a multitude  
“ of birds ever existed.”

How singularly picturesque is the appearance of the Bass isle in the Firth of Forth, as described by Dr. Harvey in his *Exercitationes on the generation of animals* ! I give the original Latin, as well as a translation of the passage, as a specimen of the classical elegance of style in which this great philosopher wrote.

“ EST insula parva, Scoti Basse  
“ nominant : haud amplius mille pas-  
“ suum circuitu amplitudo ejus clau-  
“ ditur. Hujus insulæ superficies,  
“ mensibus Maio & Junio nidis ovis  
“ pullisque propemodum tota infrata  
“ est, adeo ut vix, præ eorum copia  
“ pedem

" pedem liberè ponere liceat: tanta-  
 " que supervolantium turba, ut nubi-  
 " um instar, solem cœlumque auferant:  
 " tantusque vociferantium clangor &  
 " strepitus, ut propè alloquentes vix au-  
 " dias. Si subiectum mare inde, tan-  
 " quam ex edita turri & altissimo præ-  
 " cipitio despexeris, idem quoquo ver-  
 " sum, infinitis diversorum generum  
 " avibus natantibus prædæque inhianti-  
 " bus, opertum videas. Si circumna-  
 " vigando imminentum clivum suspicere  
 " libuerit; videas in singulis prærupti  
 " loci crepidinibus & recessibus, avi-  
 " um cujuslibet generis & magnitudinis,  
 " ordines innumerabiles, plures sanè  
 " quam nocte, sereno cœlo, stellæ con-  
 " spiciuntur. Si advolantes avolantef-  
 " que eminùs adspexeris, apum profec-

## NATURAL HISTORY. 129

“to ingens examen credas.” *Exercit. 11.*

“THERE is a small Island, called by the Scotch *the Bafs*, not more than a mile in circumference. Its surface is almost entirely covered during the months of May and June with nests, eggs, and young birds; so that it is difficult to set a foot without treading on them: while the flocks of birds flying round are so prodigious, that they darken the air like a cloud; and their noise and clamour is so great, that persons can scarce hear one another speak. If from the summit of the precipice you look down on the subjacent ocean, you see it on every side covered with infinite numbers of birds of different kinds, swimming and hunting

K

their

130 POETICAL USE OF

their prey. If you sail round the island, and survey the impending cliffs, you behold in every fissure and recess of the craggy rocks innumerable ranks of birds of various kinds and sizes, surpassing in multitude the stars in a serene sky. If you view from a distance the flocks flying to and from the island, you may imagine them a vast swarm of bees."

MANY other of the western isles of Scotland offer spectacles equally grand and amusing; so that the barrenness of the vegetable creation in these regions, is amply compensated, with respect to the imagination at least, by the animated treasures of the sea and sky. Thomson was by no means insensible of the descriptive beauties arising

## NATURAL HISTORY. 131

sing from this source which his own country afforded. He has however contented himself with a very general, though indeed a striking view of them.

— where the Northern ocean, in vast whirls,  
Boils round the naked melancholy isles  
Of farthest Thule, and th' Atlantic surge  
Pours in among the naked Hebrides ;  
Who can recount what transmigrations there  
Are annual made ? what nations come and go ?  
And how the living clouds on clouds arise !  
Infinite wings ! till all the plume-dark air,  
And rude resounding shore are one wild cry.

WERE I to propose a subject for descriptive poetry, which at the same time that it afforded uncommon scope for grand and original painting in natural history, also offered copious matter for philosophical and moral reflex-

## 132 POETICAL USE OF

ion, connected by strict unity of design, I should mention, in preference to any other that at present occurs to me, that of the *migration of birds*. The knowledge, indeed, requisite for treating this subject in a masterly manner, would be superior to that of the professed naturalist; since this branch of his researches is yet in its infancy. Many curious circumstances, however, might be collected for the purpose, from the writings of those who have already paid the most attention to it;\* and for the rest, the poet should think it incumbent upon him to discover and investigate *new facts*, as well as to frame *new combinations of words*.

\* SEE Mr. Pennant's Paper on the *Migration of British Birds*. Br. Zool. V. II. Append. No. VI. edit. 4th.

## NATURAL HISTORY. 133

IN the former part of this Essay, a quotation from Thomson was introduced, for the purpose of shewing how much novelty this original observer had given to one of the most common subjects of rural description, the singing of birds. Yet he, as well as every other poet, has failed to remark a circumstance which might add a pleasing variety to this topic. This is the manner in which young birds practice their songs as learners, well known to the bird-catchers by the term *recording*. The Hon. Mr. Daines Barrington, in his *Experiments and Observations on the Singing of Birds*, Phil. Transf. Vol. LXIII. elegantly describes it in the following passage.

“ THIS first essay does not seem to

K 3

“ have



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“ have the least rudiments of the fu-  
“ ture song; but as the bird grows old-  
“ er and stronger, one may begin to  
“ perceive what the nestling is aiming  
“ at. Whilst the scholar is thus en-  
“ deavouring to form his song, when  
“ he is once sure of a passage, he  
“ commonly raises his tone, which  
“ he drops again when he is not e-  
“ qual to what he is attempting; just  
“ as a singer raises his voice, when  
“ he not only recollects certain parts  
“ of a tune with precision, but knows  
“ that he can execute them. What  
“ the nestling is not thus thoroughly  
“ master of, he hurries over, lowering  
“ his tone, as if he did not wish to  
“ be heard, and could not yet satisfy  
“ himself.”

THIS

NATURAL HISTORY. 135

THIS *recording* lasts for ten or eleven months, which makes it more extraordinary that no poetical observer has taken notice of it. Mr. Barrington gives the following lines from the *Sylvæ* of Statius as the only passage in which it seems the least hinted at.

---

Nunc volucrum novi  
Quæstus, inexpertumque carmen,  
Quod tacitâ statuere brumâ.

Now in new strains the feather'd choir complain,  
And untried lays, in silent winter plann'd.

PLINY, however, in his account of the nightingale, minutely describes the state of a learner of that species. "Meditantur aliæ juniores, versusque, quos imitentur, accipiunt. Audit dis-

## 136 POETICAL USE OF

“*cupula intentione magna, et reddit:*  
“*vicibusque reticent. Intelligitur emen-*  
“*datæ correptio, et in docente quædam*  
“*reprehensio.*” “The younger sort me-  
ditate and receive lessons for their imi-  
tation. The scholar listens with great  
attention, and repeats; and each is si-  
lent by turns. An attempt to mend  
in a corrected passage may be per-  
ceived; and a kind of ~~reprehension~~ in  
the teacher.”

FROM the same ingenious paper of  
Mr. Barrington's we learn, that the  
music of the nightingale, of which the  
highly laboured descriptions of Pliny  
and Strada, copied by the poets, have  
given only confused and indefinite i-  
deas, has in reality all the excellen-  
cies

## NATURAL HISTORY. 137

cies ascribed to it, but excellencies of a kind which may be clearly and scientifically stated.

"Its tone," says he, "is infinitely more mellow than that of any other bird, though at the same time, by a proper exertion of its musical powers, it can be excessively brilliant.

"When this bird, (a very fine caged nightingale which Mr. B. kept) *sang its song round*, in its whole compass, I have observed sixteen different beginnings and closes, at the same time that the intermediate notes were commonly varied in their succession with such  
"judgment

## 138 POETICAL USE OF

“ judgment as to produce a most pleasing variety.\*

“ THE next point of superiority in a nightingale, is its continuance of song, without a pause, which I have observed sometimes not to be less than twenty seconds. Whenever respiration, however, became necessary, it was taken with as much judgment as by an opera singer.”

“ BUT it is not only in tone and va-

\* THIS variety of the nightingale's song is most poetically expressed in a line of Homer's *Odyssey*, B. XIX. V. 521.

Ἦτε θάμα τροπῶσα χεεὶ πολυηχεὰ φωνήν.

MR. PORR's translation of it is excessively languid.

“ To vernal airs attunes her varied strain.”

I SHALL venture to offer one, which, at least, approaches nearer to the original.

Quick varying pours her many-sounding strain.

“ riety

## NATURAL HISTORY. 139

“riety that the nightingale excells; the  
“bird also sings (if I may so express  
“myself) with superior judgment and  
“taste.”

“I HAVE therefore commonly ob-  
“served that my nightingale began  
“softly like the ancient orators; re-  
“serving its breath to swell certain  
“notes, which by this means had  
“a most astonishing effect, and which  
“eludes all verbal description.”

If poets have been inattentive to  
the real state of nature in their own  
country, it cannot be expected that  
their pictures of foreign regions should  
be accurate and characteristic. Yet,  
were they sufficiently qualified by their  
own observation, or the authentic ac-  
counts

counts of others, for the attempt, it is obvious that no source could be so productive of novelty, as the description of countries where almost every object is new. Such, to the inhabitant of a temperate climate, are the polar and tropical parts of the globe. It is highly to the credit of Virgil's genius, that he first among the ancient poets ventured to transport his reader into a new world, and place the soft Italian amid the rigours of a Scythian winter.\* His description of this dreary scene has been thought so just and lively, as to be very closely imitated even by the natural Thomson; who has, however, according to his usual manner, greatly improved upon it, by the addition of new circumstances. To the flocks and herds

\* Georg. III. v. 349 and seq.

buried

## NATURAL HISTORY. 141

buried in snow, and the hunted stag  
unable to make way through the oppos-  
ing mass, which so much enliven the  
winter-piece of Virgil, he adds the  
“furry nations” that form the chief  
riches of the Siberian deserts;

————— tipst with jet,  
Fair ermines, spotless as the snows they press;  
Sables of glossy black; and dark-embrown'd,  
Or beauteous freakt with many a mingled hue,  
Thousands besides, the costly pride of courts.

AND he fills up the measure of horror  
residing in these desolate regions, by a  
most animated picture of their conge-  
nial inhabitant, the bear.

There thro' the piny forest half absorpt,  
Rough tenant of these shades, the shapeless bear,  
With dangling ice all horrid, stalks forlorn;  
Slow-pac'd, and sourer as the storms increase,

He



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He makes his bed beneath th' inclement drift,  
And, with stern patience, scorning weak complaint,  
Hardens his heart again affailing want.

BUT our original painter does not here relinquish the idea of deriving novelty from the foreign and distant scenery of his pieces. Writing for more northern readers than the Roman poet did, he judiciously proceeds still nearer the pole, and gives a view of the face of nature and human manners in Lapland. His just and spirited sketch might, however, receive considerable improvement from the natural history of that animal upon which almost the whole œconomy of the Laplander turns, the Reindeer, as it is given with much elegance as well as accuracy by a Swedish writer in the *Amanitates Academicæ*.

IN

## NATURAL HISTORY. 143

IN that vast chain of mountains which divides the Norwegian from the Swedish Lapland, amidst perpetual storms and everlasting snows, the Reindeer passes the short summer of the polar regions, grazing at large on the white *Lichen*, which is almost the sole vegetable production of the sterile soil. Here he finds a refuge against the immense swarms of insects which fill all the lakes and marshes of that country, one of which, a species of *oestrus* or gad-fly, he so much dreads, from its property of depositing its eggs in his back, that the noise of a single one hovering in the air drives a whole herd, in spite of the efforts of the herdsman and his dog, to the very summits of the highest hills. In winter, qualified as he is by nature to endure the extremity of cold, he is  
yet

## 144 POETICAL USE OF

yet obliged to descend to the woody region which every where skirts the desert tract at the foot of the mountains. Here a different kind of moss, or *lichen*, finds a shelter in the thick forests of pine from the intense frosts; and the Reindeer, provided with a callous skin at the end of his snout, is enabled to come at his food, though deep buried in the snow. No farmer in the milder countries of Europe can more rejoice at viewing his meadows cloathed with cheerful green, than the Laplander at the sight of his dreary moors whitened over with the vegetable which is to be the sustenance of his herd. In these wild solitudes he passes day and night, abroad, in the bitterest inclemency of the seasons, securely wrapt in garments supplied by his faithful Reindeer; the milk and  
flesh

## NATURAL HISTORY. 145

flesh of which is his principal food, and the number, his only riches. This is the pastoral life in Lapland ! A striking contrast indeed to that in the soft climates of Arcadia and Sicily ; yet not without its charms to the simple native, nor unprovided with subjects for descriptive poetry.

If from hence we turn our eyes to countries “ *nimio sub sole calentes*,” burning under a vertical sun, we shall discover a face of nature still more different from that of a temperate climate, and inexhaustibly fertile in new and striking objects. The vegetable and animal creations, the very earth, rivers and seas, are all on a scale and after a model so unlike those of our world, that the slightest view cannot fail of

L offering

146 POETICAL USE OF

offering novelty and exciting wonder. As Thomson has so forcibly deepened the horrors of his *Winter* from the Pole, so he has not been less successful in heightening the brilliancy of his *Summer* from the Line. What a rich garden of Exotics does he spread before us in the following lines?

Bear me, Pomona ! to thy citron groves ;  
 To where the lemon and the piercing lime,  
 With the deep orange, glowing thro' the green,  
 Their lighter glories blend. Lay me reclin'd  
 Beneath the spreading tamarind that shakes,  
 Fann'd by the breeze, its fever-cooling fruit.  
 Deep in the night the massy locust sheds,  
 Quench my hot limbs ; or lead me thro' the maze,  
 Embowering endless, of the Indian fig ;  
 Or thrown at gayer ease, on some fair brow,  
 Let me behold, by breezy murmurs cool'd,  
 Broad o'er my head the verdant cedar wave,  
 And high palmetos lift their graceful shade.

O stretch'd

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O stretch'd amid these orchards of the sun,  
Give me to drain the cocoa's milky bowl,  
And from the palm to draw its freshening wine!

THESE are the *beauties* of the vegetable race: but if dignity and grandeur are the characters we desire, what can be a more majestic object than the *Palma Maxima*,\* which grows, perfectly straight and regular, to the amazing height of one hundred and twenty feet? What a more astonishing spectacle than the prodigious mass of wood reared up in the *Calabash tree*, which sinks our noblest oaks into shrubs? Mr. Adanson measured two of these, the trunks of which were, one, seventy four, the other, seventy seven feet in

\* WRETCHEDLY degraded by its vulgar name of the *Cabbage tree*!

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circumference ; or above twenty five in diameter. Single branches of these, he says, would have made some of the largest trees in Europe ; and the whole seemed to form a forest of itself.

ALL the several parts of Nature correspond with each other. Under the shade of these mighty vegetables walk the elephant and rhinoceros. The vast rivers of the southern continents are inhabited by the crocodile and hippopotamus. The unrelenting heat of the tropical sun is, as it were, reflected in the untameable fierceness of the beasts of prey which spread desolation far and wide through the deserts of these regions ; and in the exalted rage and venom of the numerous serpents with which they are infested. What infinite scope  
for

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for new and striking description would the animal history of these countries afford to the poet who should be able to draw it from original sources! Even the *sketches* of Thomson on this subject are finer pictures than almost any others in descriptive poetry. What magnificence in the scenery of the following lines!

Along these lonely regions, where retir'd,  
From little scenes of art, great Nature dwells  
In awful solitude, and nought is seen  
But the wild herds that own no master's stall,  
Prodigious rivers roll their fatning seas:  
On whose luxuriant herbage, half-conceal'd,  
Like a fallen cedar, far-diffus'd his train,  
Cas'd in green scales, the crocodile extends.

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Peaceful, beneath primeval trees that cast  
Their ample shade o'er Niger's yellow stream,



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And where the Ganges rolls his sacred wave ;  
Or mid the central depth of blackening woods,  
High rais'd in solemn theatre around,  
Leans the huge elephant.

HORROR, wrought up to its highest pitch, gives wonderful sublimity to the passage representing the nightly roamings of the beasts of prey.

These, rushing from th' inhospitable woods  
Of Mauritania, or the tufted isles,  
That verdant rise amid the Lybian wild,  
Innumerable glare around their shaggy king,  
Majestic, stalking o'er the printed sand ;  
And, with imperious and repeated roars,  
Demand their fated food. The fearful flocks  
Croud near the guardian swain ; the nobler herds,  
Where round their lordly bull, in rural ease,  
They ruminating lie, with horror hear  
The coming rage. Th' awakened village starts ;  
And to her fluttering breast the mother strains  
Her thoughtless infant. From the Pirate's den,  
Or

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Or stern Morocco's tyrant fang escap'd,  
The wretch half-wishes for his bonds again :  
While, uproar all, the wilderness resounds,  
From Atlas eastward to the frighted Nile.

DR. GOLDSMITH had probably this description in his memory when he drew the following picture of the same subject, which, however, he has rendered sufficiently different by judiciously dwelling upon the natural history of the scene, rather than the passion it inspires.

“ NOTHING can be more terrible than  
“ an African landscape at the close of  
“ evening: the deep toned roarings of  
“ the lion; the shriller yellings of the  
“ tyger; the jackall, pursuing by the  
“ scent, and barking like a dog; the  
“ hyæna, with a note peculiarly solitary  
“ and

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“and dreadful; but to crown all, the  
 “hissing of the various kinds of ser-  
 “pents, that at that time begin their  
 “call, and, as I am assured, make a  
 “much louder symphony than the  
 “birds in our groves in a morning.”

It is very rare that Thomson does not excel when he imitates; yet the want of an accurate idea to work upon has injured the effect of some very fine lines,\* apparently intended as a free copy from the accurate description, already quoted, of the *Cerberus* of Virgil. The Latin poet describes a particular species of serpent; Thomson means to paint some large and terrible creature of that tribe, but without con-

\* *Summer*, l. 897, & seq.

fining

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fining the draught to one individual kind. His images are therefore too general and indiscriminate.

MR. ADANSON, however, furnishes some circumstances for a description of the enormous *gigantic serpent* of Africa, which a poet might employ with striking effect. He conjectures this animal to be from forty to fifty foot long at its full growth; and thus describes the manner in which it seeks its prey.

“ He lurks in morasses, and places not  
“ far from the water. His tail is curled  
“ two or three rounds of a circle, which  
“ include a circumference from five to  
“ six feet diameter, over which he  
“ rears his head with part of his body.  
“ In this attitude, and as it were im-  
“ moveable, he throws his eyes all  
“ round

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“ round, and when he perceives an animal within reach, he darts upon it by means of the circumvolutions of his tail, which have the same effect as a strong spring.”

Thus does every scene of nature, foreign or domestic, afford objects from whence an accurate survey may derive new ideas of grandeur or beauty. Thus, where a careless eye only beholds an ordinary and indistinct landscape, one accustomed to examine, compare, and discriminate will discern detached figures and groups, which, judiciously brought forwards, may be wrought into the most striking pictures. These simple propositions were not of a kind which *reasoning* could render more evident. To give

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give a lively impression and feeling of their truth by *examples* was the only purpose to be pursued with advantage. Taste may perhaps be fixed and explained by philosophical investigation; but it can only be *formed* by frequent contemplation of the objects with which it is conversant. This, it is hoped, will prove a sufficient apology for the numerous quotations which compose so large a share of this volume. Many of these, it is probable, will be familiar to the reader; but by appearing in a particular connexion, and being brought into comparison with similar passages, they may be viewed in new lights, and their beauties become more conspicuous. At least, they may renew many agreeable ideas in the reader's mind; and thus  
secure

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secure him some of that amusement,  
which the critical part of the work  
might fail to afford.

T H E E N D.

